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The
WOOING of a
WAYWARD ROGUE

Scandalous Spinsters 7

EMMA LOCKE

FOR MONEY...

There comes a time in every spinster's life when she accepts there is no white knight riding to her rescue. When Miss Georgiana Conley's infamous, wealthy aunt offers to make her an heiress in exchange for her company, Georgiana is relieved she will no longer burden her impoverished family. But though her scandalous aunt has retired to the country, she's not quite as lonely as she's led Georgiana to believe.

She has a beau.

Stephan Laurent, Lord de Winter, is handsome, charming, and suspiciously devoted to a woman twice his age. He must have designs on Georgiana's inheritance. Though she immediately vows to chase the silver-tongued fortune hunter away, she soon questions whether she is protecting her aunt, her inheritance...or her heart.

The Wooing of a Wayward Rogue

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THE WOOING OF A WAYWARD ROGUE

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Also by Emma Locke

Scandalous Spinsters

The Trouble with Being Wicked

The Problem with Seduction

A Game of Persuasion

The Art of Ruining a Rake

The Enchanting of an Earl

The Danger in Daring a Lady

The Wooing of a Wayward Rogue

The Luring of a Lovely Lady

*For everyone who did the seemingly impossible work of saving our
democracy*

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Also by Emma Locke

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Chapter 1

March, 1816
Yorkshire, England

THE MAN WHOSE muddied boots and sodden greatcoat tracked debris across the newly cleaned floor was accustomed to servants. Miss Georgiana Conley, no more genteel than the tavern girl scouring the table beside hers, frowned. She knew a spoiled aristocrat when she saw one, even if she'd never seen one up close.

The damp floor squeaked as he shifted out of his greatcoat and hung it on a peg. Even from twenty paces, the quality of his coat was apparent. No patches mended the wool. Wide lapels had been pressed into submission by an indefatigable valet. The rest of his attire was just as fine. His bright neckcloth billowed in an impressive fall despite the weather's attempt to collapse it. Such an extravagance of linen belied the simplicity of his drab-colored superfine coat, brown satin waistcoat, and buff breeches.

She supposed it was all meant to resemble country garb. Yet each piece was too well-made to be confused for common goods, just as the man himself.

Feigning interest in the ladies' periodical spread open beside her tea service, Georgiana watched him cross the room.

A talented tailor, aided by that aforementioned valet, had contrived to make the most of his long, lean form, likely the product of horse riding and pugilism. According to her *Ladies' Companion Magazine*, those were the activities young aristocrats participated in when they felt inclined to stretch their limbs.

And what fine limbs he had. Despite the tavern's dim lighting, made even darker by the storm raging outside, Georgiana could clearly see the shape of his powerful thighs and the solid curve of his

"That's Lord de Winter," the tavern girl whispered, her hand methodically scrubbing the spot where the stain had surely been resolved some minutes ago.

Georgiana snapped her gaze from the handsome stranger's

derriere. Had she been staring at his *backside*?

She raised her teacup to her lips, determined to ignore Lord de Winter, but the contents had already grown cold. She took a sip, anyway. Goodness, had she really *stared* at him? Her face was hotter than her tea.

"I won't say a word about it," the tavern girl reassured her with a wink, still whispering. "We've all done it. He comes once a week, like clockwork, on account of the ale." She pointed to an empty table in the nearest corner. "The ladies' sewing circle meets on Wednesday afternoons just so they can ogle him. They'd be here now, but for the storm."

Georgiana's mortified flush threatened to heat the entire tavern. *Ogling* men was what her fluff-brained younger sisters did. Georgiana, a confirmed spinster of five and thirty, did not.

"That will be all," she said, as firmly as a headmistress taking a student to task. Though she shouldn't have been staring at him, it was poor manners for the girl to call her out. "Please bring more hot water for my tea."

"Yes, mum." She didn't appear the least bit chastened as she ran off.

She couldn't be much older than Georgiana's youngest sister. Fourteen was old enough to know better than to gossip with strangers. But it wasn't Georgiana's place anymore to worry about such things, was it? From now on, the only unmarried female she must manage was herself.

She forced her attention back to her magazine. The yellowing issue was three years outdated. The whole of England, it seemed, had read every volume of *Ladies' Companion Magazine* except her. She had plenty of catching up to do, and all the time in the world now to do it.

The lurid tale of an unfortunate debutante and her irresistible rake quickly recaptured Georgiana's attention. For years, she'd confiscated her sisters' contraband magazines whenever she'd come upon them under a couch cushion or tucked between the loose bricks in their fireplace. The gossip rag's subject matter was highly inappropriate for unmarried ladies. Georgiana had locked them all in a trunk, never to be seen again.

Until now.

As she fell back into the story, she almost forgot about Lord de Winter. His animated conversation with the tavernkeeper was too distant to eavesdrop upon, not that she would have done so, and she most certainly wasn't going to be caught ogling his backside again. Still, she hadn't realized how much she'd put him from her mind until a warm, male voice caused her to jump out of her skin.

"Would you like more light?" Lord de Winter set a lantern on the

table as she looked up in astonishment.

He nudged it closer to her open magazine. She slammed her hand over the salacious text, covering as much as possible with her blunt-nailed fingers.

His eyes laughed at her. At least he didn't mock her magazine outright. "Reading in the dark gives me a devil of a megrim."

Despite the sudden dryness in her throat, she managed to find her voice. "You're very forward, sir."

He chuckled, making the table between them seem too narrow. "I can hardly stand about when I see a damsel in distress. Lord de Winter, at your service." He made an effortless yet graceful bow. "Might I have the name of the lady I've saved?"

She pursed her lips, wary of anyone who'd go through so much trouble for an introduction. Especially to an unchaperoned female traveling alone. "I wasn't in need of rescue, my lord. Thank you, just the same."

"Is that a *Ladies' Companion*?" he asked, leaning forward to peer at her magazine. And why wouldn't he ignore her attempt to put him in his place? She was the aging sister of a blacksmith, while he was a nobleman in his prime.

She threw her serviette across the issue, but it was too late. She caught a tantalizing whiff of spice and leather as his head dipped toward her magazine.

His dark brows rose in surprise as he stood tall again. "March, eighteen thirteen? Where did you even procure such an ancient tome?"

"Your manners, sir!" She snapped up the magazine and rolled it into a tube, much like she'd done at home when she'd needed to scold her brother's yapping little dog.

He laughed outright. "Do you intend to whack me with that? Go on. I'm trying to recall what sort of gossipmongering would have been done three years ago. I was something of a man about town, then. Perhaps I'm mentioned."

She gripped the yellowed roll and eyed him suspiciously. She was acutely aware of her plainness; she'd had an age to come to terms with it. A titled lord who considered himself "a man about town" had no reason to take an interest in her, aside from simple boredom.

"I know the publisher of this magazine," he remarked, undeterred by Georgiana's irritated silence. "I doubt even she has editions as old as this. Would you like a more recent copy? I probably have an issue in my saddlebag."

He read *Ladies' Companion Magazine*? Why?

But of course. He wanted to know what was being said about him.

"I couldn't return it. I'm only staying the night." Georgiana didn't

mention that she had a valise packed almost entirely with old *Ladies' Companion Magazines* in her room upstairs. He'd laugh at her. Best to send him on his way, before he became impossible to unseat.

"Oh? Where are you bound?" His voice was light with friendly interest.

Her hackles rose. This was how it started. She'd read enough accounts of stolen virtue to recognize the beginnings of a compromise.

"I'd rather not say."

"Of course," he agreed, without a trace of contrition. "That's a private matter. It seems we're the only two people lucky enough to have found shelter on what has become a miserable afternoon. I suppose you'd be even more scandalized if I begged a seat at your table and requested two draughts of what I can assure you is very fine ale." He leaned forward again, his hands on the back of the chair across from her. "I promise it's not your virtue I'm after, but your company."

Her lips parted in shock. "Sir!"

"My lord' is more appropriate." His face crinkled with good humor. "Perhaps you haven't met that many earls."

She gripped the paper tube in her hand until it crumpled. She'd been told men could be persistent. She'd warned her sisters about it. Her own brother, a mere apprentice blacksmith at the time, had wooed the daughter of a local viscount until she'd agreed to elope with him. Men simply didn't take no for an answer.

"Just say 'no' if you prefer your privacy," Lord de Winter said, much to her surprise. "I'm entirely capable of dining at the counter. It's what I usually do."

It was as if he'd read her mind. She hesitated before answering.

"Perhaps next time, then," he said, releasing the chair and giving a little bow. "I've been told I improve with exposure."

Oh, but it was on the tip of her tongue to tell him to stay! Hours remained before she could prepare for bed. She hadn't taken dinner yet. The wrinkled magazine in her hand suddenly seemed an overreaction. What did it matter if she made the acquaintance of an attractive gentleman, when she was on her way to ruin, anyway?

He turned and walked away. She watched his powerful thighs carry him across the room. It wasn't improper to stare *now*, was it? They'd been in conversation.

Her heart thumped faster as he approached the counter and pulled out a stool. Mayhap she'd misjudged him, after all. She hadn't expected him to give up so easily. What if he had merely wanted to make idle conversation to pass the time?

That must have been it. Why had she thought he viewed her as anything but respectable company? She was utterly shrewish-looking.

As she finished her now-refreshed tea, she couldn't keep herself from drinking in Lord de Winter from across the room, a real-life rogue torn from the pages of her magazine. His broad shoulders and back were to her. Yet she still felt the devastating smile he'd bestowed upon her. He'd already turned it on the tavernkeeper's wife, who wouldn't stop blushing.

There was no valid reason why she couldn't converse with him. As of last Saturday, she was no longer Miss Conley, dried-up spinster and sometimes-governess to four boisterous sisters. Her giggling younger sisters lived and breathed the hope of meeting a man just like Lord de Winter, despite being the poor relations of a village blacksmith.

Why shouldn't she be the one to have the adventure?

The longer she thought about it, the easier it became to reconcile. If she invited Lord de Winter back to her table, no one would be the wiser. And if someone did learn of her private conversation with the earl, what did it matter? Tomorrow, she planned to throw in her lot with her maternal aunt, a retired stage actress. Actresses were barely a step above harlots. Living with Aunt Millie would drive the final nail into her coffin. Why guard a reputation she no longer needed?

She tried not to let the memory of his sparkling eyes sway her decision. If only she'd seen the like of him before, he might have been easier to resist.

More than enough time passed wherein he could have changed his mind and come back on his own. Very well, then. As with everything else, this was clearly up to her.

She rose and went to the counter. He looked up in surprise as she materialized beside him.

"I'm bound for York, actually," Georgiana announced.

He set aside his empty tankard. "Oh?"

"I've never been," she said. Not an express invitation for him to join her, but enough to provide an opening, should he wish to take it. "My destination is a half day's drive, I'm told, though the mud will slow the horses."

He smiled broadly and leaned aside, one hand planted on the waxed countertop. "My estate is in York! I've been spending more time there recently, though I'm currently returning from London."

Feeling as though she wasn't herself at all, Georgiana offered him a brief glance. So this was what it felt like to have a man's attention. No wonder she'd had such trouble holding her sisters back from their determined pursuit of the local militiamen, newly stationed in Gloucester. She could almost swoon.

Lord de Winter rose. He indicated to her table. "May I?"

She nodded once, still unable to overcome the years of decorum drilled into her head. He offered his arm, the first man besides her

brother to do so.

Those ten steps felt like Moses crossing the desert. Was this truly happening? To her?

Once she'd seated herself on the bench, Lord de Winter pulled out the chair across from hers and folded himself into it. Without even having to be asked, the tavernkeeper appeared with two tankards of ale and a crusty loaf of bread.

Lord de Winter lifted his tankard toward Georgiana in salute. His eyes gleamed. "To throwing caution to the wind."

Well, she wasn't ready to jest about it yet. Nevertheless, she tipped her tankard the barest amount in his direction, then sipped from it.

The ale was good. She'd been drinking her brother's ale in the evenings for years, though only Gavin knew it. There were *some* benefits to being the eldest sibling.

"Do you like it?" Lord de Winter grinned as if he'd shared a brilliant secret with her.

"It's drinkable," she demurred. In truth, it was the best she'd ever had. She took another sip. "The tavernkeeper's wife should be commended."

"His wife—!" Lord de Winter appeared insulted.

"It's his wife who makes the ale, I'm sure." Georgiana had been her brother's brewer as well as his taster, as many chatelaines were. But she supposed this privileged London dandy knew little about how ale was produced.

"For most ales, I suppose," Lord de Winter allowed. "But this is brewed in an alehouse. The largest outside of London."

"This isn't private stock?" She eyed her tankard, surprised it was so well-balanced. Most ales couldn't survive being transported farther than a few miles before they began to degrade.

They passed the next hour discussing hops, yeast, and temperature. If ale wasn't the most interesting subject, it was at least a safe one. He knew more about brewing than she'd credited.

The time passed too quickly. She'd never sat and simply talked to a man. It was enlightening to find she could converse with one about nothing important, with no expectation of anything. She was unlikely to see him again, even if they were both bound for York.

Even if he were not impossibly far above her station, no respectable person would receive her once she became her infamous aunt's companion.

The weather cleared before dinner. Georgiana tried not to feel disappointment as she watched the tavern door close behind him. Two decades of perfect comportment had set her up for a lifetime of loneliness. Fiercely guarding her reputation—until now—had gained her nothing. Was it any wonder she'd decided to spend an afternoon

in Lord de Winter's company?

But she must not make the mistake of thinking him more than a single day's novelty. He'd certainly never think of her again.

Chapter 2

GEORGIANA'S VALISE THUDDERED as she set it on the thick rug in the middle of her aunt's front parlor. The old leather sack contained all of Georgiana's earthly belongings, which was to say, it contained four dozen *Ladies' Companion Magazines*, some undergarments, a night rail, one pair of slippers, and two serviceable dresses.

She glanced at the clock. Was the maid never to return? Aunt Millie ought to have risen and dressed by now. It was almost noon.

She tapped her foot impatiently. Surely, she hadn't surprised Aunt Millie. She'd sent word of her impending arrival just after Lord de Winter had taken his leave from the tavern the previous evening.

She strained to detect any sound of life in the long corridor that had swallowed up the maid who'd promised to fetch her aunt.

Not a peep.

What was taking so long?

Despite Georgiana's eagerness to settle in—to say nothing of her desire for a nice, hot cup of tea to flush the chill of her carriage ride—she felt a hint of relief. The household would clearly benefit from her presence. Once she settled into her new bedchamber, she'd take the reins of this estate and turn the management of it around.

The abrupt *whoosh* of a door being opened gave Georgiana her chance. Done with waiting to be summoned, she took up her valise and strode toward the sound.

She stopped abruptly as the door banged closed again.

"What the devil!" a deep, male voice protested, causing Georgiana to freeze in the darkened corridor. "My clothes are in there!"

Georgiana tried not to look, but it was too late.

It was *too late*.

A man stood not ten feet distant. A naked man. A very virile, unexpectedly close-to-her age naked man.

A man who she immediately recognized as Lord de Winter.

He clasped a ball of his wadded smallclothes to his groin as he rapped insistently on the door. He gave no indication he'd seen her. "What in God's name are you playing at, woman?"

Georgiana commanded her eyes to close. She ordered her feet to

turn her back.

To her horror, she didn't do either. She seemed to have grown roots.

It was shock. It must be shock. This was the second time in as many days she was riveted to Lord de Winter's form. The man was chiseled from pure stone. Surely, she wasn't *ogling* the corded muscle tracing his flat stomach. Wasn't deeply aware of how it rippled across his abdomen, reluctantly disappearing beneath the linen clutched in his hand.

Didn't notice how his broad, muscular chest was dusted by shadow, as were his thighs and calves.

Georgiana snapped herself into decorum so hard, her teeth clacked together.

His head jerked up. His surprise at seeing her just a few feet away changed to chagrin so quickly, she might have imagined it.

Then his handsome face broke into a lazy smile, as if they were passing each other in the park. "And so we meet again, Miss...?"

Her wits were buried beneath layers of outrage and confusion. "Your manners, sir!" It was becoming an ode with him.

He chuckled. "You know by now that I have none. But what are you doing?"

What was she—? Oh!

She squeezed her eyes closed. Had she been staring at his *chest* again?

At least it *was* his chest.

Without opening her eyes, she said flatly, "This is to be my home. I ought to be able to walk the halls without encountering..." How did she describe him? What on earth *was* this?

What in heaven's name was he *doing* here?

"You may as well open your eyes," he suggested reasonably. "We're long past propriety at this point, surely."

She shouldn't. And yet, she wouldn't soon forget what she'd already seen.

One by one, she opened her eyes.

Without sliding his gaze from her, he rapped the back of his knuckles against the doorframe.

Whose doorframe?

But she knew.

After a moment of silence, he tried again. A sickening sense of dread settled in her stomach. She knew.

With slightly less nonchalance than he'd been displaying, he slapped the flat of his hand against the door. "Millie," he said, his voice taking on an edge, "Millie, open the door. *Now*."

Georgiana's heart plummeted. She was right. He'd been cavorting

with *her aunt*. How could this day get any worse?

She should leave. This was beyond the pale. She was outraged. Outraged! Surely, that was the emotion churning her stomach like milk into butter.

How could Lord de Winter be *here*?

But Georgiana couldn't quite persuade her feet to turn back toward the parlor, and she couldn't quite keep her gaze on his face.

He was so... smooth. Every inch of him. She had the most horrifying urge to trace the firm indentations of his muscled chest.

She mentally righted her composure in a futile attempt to bring order back into her world. It seemed she'd caught Lord de Winter *in flagrante delicto* with her aunt. How terribly, inexplicably...

Disappointing?

His lips quirked as he continued to regard her with amusement, a lock of dark hair falling across his eyes.

"Millie," he drawled again. "Your niece is out here. With *me*. Open the damned door."

"Good," a woman replied. "And no. I'm not opening the door."

Georgiana's eyes widened. *Good*? Was her aunt deranged?

"Georgiana, child," Aunt Millie called to her, sounding quite lucid—though who could tell, really? "Do be a dear and show Lord de Winter out. He was just about to leave."

Lord de Winter's brown eyes twinkled at Georgiana. He seemed to be taking it all in stride, though she sensed he was deeply embarrassed. "Not without my coat," he objected, loud enough for Aunt Millie to hear.

Oh! Was that meant to be funny? It certainly was not.

"Aunt Millie, please," Georgiana implored through the door, wishing she could forget this entire incident had ever happened. If only she'd never met him! To think, she'd found him pleasant company, when she'd known he must be a rake.

After another sharp rap of his knuckles, the door finally cracked open. A female limb extended. Aunt Millie's arm was surprisingly firm, her wrist dainty. In her hand she offered his clothing: wrinkled buckskin breeches, a tangle of white linen that must include his shirtsleeves and cravat, and a slip of silky brown fabric.

Lord de Winter's brow furrowed as he collected the proffered items and clutched them to his groin. He was annoyed, though doing a fair job of concealing it.

In a blink, his façade was back in place. He regarded Georgiana with dry amusement while he waited for Aunt Millie to return his coat and hat, too. She flipped his beaver to him through the open door, causing him to almost lose his hold on his clothes as he attempted to catch it.

She laughed throatily at his peril, not seeming to care he was put out. Lord de Winter's grunt of protest was the only sign he was irritated.

Aunt Millie's slim arm re-emerged. She set two black Hessians on the floor.

With that, the door closed in his face.

Georgiana gaped at it. Aunt Millie was even more scandalous in person. What sort of woman toyed with an earl?

Within a heartbeat, he had control of himself again. In a sense, he was the truest gentleman. Georgiana had never seen anyone played so badly without responding in a towering rage.

"I don't mean to presume too much, Miss Conley," he said with perfect politeness, as if he weren't standing before her cradling an armload of clothing over his nether regions. "But I suspect between the two of us, I'm more familiar with this house. Pardon me for abandoning you while I set myself to rights. I'll just be a moment."

With that, he spun on his unshod heel. Georgiana didn't think fast enough to remember to close her eyes. With the deepest, most humiliating appreciation for the Lord's work, she realized she had an uninterrupted view of Lord de Winter's bare backside as he strode further into her aunt's country cottage.

"He'll do," a sultry voice murmured behind her, scaring Georgiana out of her skin. "Very well, I think."

Georgiana turned slowly. She almost dreaded finally meeting the infamous woman whom she'd heard so much about from her sister, Elinor.

Aunt Millie leaned against the open doorway, clad only in a dressing gown. Her bright red chignon was in messy disarray.

Georgiana wished she'd mistaken the situation she'd happened upon. But there was no misinterpreting the older woman's state of dishabille. Nor could Georgiana convince herself this woman was anyone but Aunt Millie. Her mother and Aunt Millie were twins. Their bold features were identical from head to toe, though life had seen fit to intervene in not-so-subtle ways.

Put plainly, Aunt Millie had made herself into a seductress.

Georgiana swallowed thickly, suddenly saddled with the full implications of the devil's bargain she'd made. Did her aunt expect her to condone this behavior? Did she expect her to *imitate* it?

Was Lord de Winter to be a fixture in this house?

"He'll do... for what?" Georgiana stammered.

"He'll do for your introduction to Society," Aunt Millie replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "We cannot go to London without a sponsor. The cost of lodging alone is prohibitive, unless you want to stay in a hovel, which I daresay, you do not."

Georgiana's heart pounded at the thought of seeing Lord de Winter again. And again. It was almost more horrifying than the thought of going to London.

Her aunt laughed at her quandary. Without a doubt, Georgiana had never heard such an indecent sound in her life.

Indecent. Unacceptable. Appalling.

Lord de Winter was absolutely...

Appalling.

Appealing.

Appalling!

"I cannot remain here," Georgiana announced suddenly, common sense prevailing. "I'm scandalized!"

Her aunt shook her head, blue eyes dancing. Even with her prominent nose and tangled hair, she was the most alluring woman Georgiana had ever seen. "Don't be a ninny. The money you wish to inherit, this small cottage, my handful of jewels—you knew when you accepted my offer everything I've earned is tainted."

"Yes, but—"

"We spinsters are allowed to have friends, are we not? Otherwise, what is the point?"

Georgiana gaped at her aunt. "That's certainly not true—"

"Silly girl, you won't tell me how to go about being me. I've been on my own since long before you were born. Now, shall we take tea? I'm famished."

"Tea?" Georgiana could barely speak. This was all too much. Aunt Millie thought they could just sit down and take tea?

There was a naked man in the house!

"He'll join us soon enough," Aunt Millie said, with a carefree wave over her shoulder. "He's not the sort to abandon a friend."

Georgiana protested as Aunt Millie took her arm and steered her toward the front parlor. "Your clothes, Aunt Millie!"

Her aunt didn't so much as glance at her wrinkled silk robe.

Georgiana had arrived with open eyes. Yet somehow, her aunt had managed to make the situation so much worse.

She must think rationally. She couldn't afford to throw over this opportunity to be named Aunt Millie's companion and heir without careful consideration.

Her aunt's modest fortune, her cottage, its contents, the very freedom this house represented, *had* been tainted from the start. Aunt Millie was the infamous Mrs. Rebmann. An actress who, judging by the nature of the situation Georgiana had interrupted, might have been more at one time.

"Good, you haven't started without me."

That voice. The slightly teasing, ever-so-masculine vibration crept

down her spine.

Lord de Winter walked around them and made himself at home on a chair.

Like an automaton, Georgiana perched on the edge of a distant sofa, her back ramrod straight. Keeping her eyes riveted on a platter of tea cakes set out on a low table before her, she began assembling a repast onto a small plate.

He wasn't going to leave.

She must decide. Either she abandoned her only hope for independence as a matter of principle, or she pushed forward and stayed.

Leave, because a naked man had scared her away.

Stay, because her only chance for security was here.

With her aunt.

With her aunt's... lover?

"Good girl," Aunt Millie murmured as Georgiana scooted back onto the settee, making her intention clear. "It seems you'll do, too."

Chapter 3

AUNT MILLIE REGARDED Georgiana with some amusement over the rim of her teacup. A sly smile played upon her lips. It hinted at news Georgiana feared would be unpleasant, at best.

“Georgiana,” her aunt said, breaking the room’s tension at last. “Allow me to introduce you to one of my dearest friends.” She turned to Lord de Winter. “This is my new companion and niece, Miss Georgiana Conley.” She paused dramatically. “Unless we are successful at finding her a husband.”

Georgiana swallowed a bite of meringue biscuit before it turned to paste in her mouth. “A husband! You can’t be serious, Aunt Millie!”

Her aunt’s smile curved wickedly. She cast a conspiratorial glance at Lord de Winter. “I never jest. Stephan has graciously agreed to take us all to London for the Season. Why shouldn’t you find a man there?”

“I couldn’t possibly accept!” Georgina avoided looking at the earl, for discussing her lack of a husband in front of him was nothing short of humiliating. “Even if I wanted to husband-hunt, which I don’t,” she lied, “I could never repay him for putting himself out on my account.”

“Nonsense,” Aunt Millie said. “He’ll be searching for a wife of his own. He’ll hardly even know we’re there. We don’t need his escort. Not even an earl can gain us entree into *ton* events.”

Georgiana blinked at her aunt’s blasé attitude toward Lord de Winter taking a wife. Hadn’t she interrupted their indiscretion mere minutes ago?

Aunt Millie leaned over and patted Stephan’s knee. “You’re a good sort. I’m confident you’ll be snapped up in no time.”

He gave her a sardonic look. “Thank you.”

Georgiana’s voice rose an octave. “You *want* him to marry?”

Aunt Millie shrugged. “Married, unmarried, makes no difference to me.”

Georgiana felt like she’d been kicked in the belly. “I cannot understand you, Aunt Millie.”

Her aunt chuckled. “Forget Stephan. It’s you I care about. You’re prettier than your mother described. I was expecting a hen but you’re more of an ugly duckling. A few flattering frocks and a maid to help

with your hair and you'll do. I'll assist with everything."

Georgiana touched her thick coil of hair, wound in its usual low knot. Hearing herself described as ugly stung, but she knew it was true. She'd done herself no favors over the years. Severity had been a necessity, what with four younger sisters to mind.

That part of her life was behind her. So much time stretched ahead. She blinked to clear her fog of surprise. "New gowns! London! But I thought I was to settle here. How can I attract a husband? I'm firmly on the shelf."

"A terrible phrase. You simply haven't had an opportunity to meet the right man. I shall provide plenty of that." Aunt Millie waved off her concern. "If you don't make a match, you'll have your place here."

Georgiana felt as though she were up against a firing squad. She didn't look at Lord de Winter. How embarrassing!

Aunt Millie bent toward her, leaning halfway over the arm of her fainting couch. "We simply can't allow a chance like this to slip through our fingers. Lord de Winter must marry, as all earls do eventually. His wife will not allow us into his house. I can't imagine another chance like this befalling you. Your valise is still packed, I trust."

Georgiana nodded numbly. Trouble was, as much as she wanted to reject anything to do with Lord de Winter, Aunt Millie dangled a tempting future before her. One she was almost afraid to admit she wanted, a dream she'd given up hope of having long ago. A husband of her own. A home. Perhaps even a family, though she must be beyond her childbearing years.

Lord de Winter remained silent. She chanced a glance at him. His expression was fixed in a mildly bored mien. If he cared he was being discussed as if he weren't there, he didn't show it.

She clutched her plate of biscuits and sandwiches. It was all so sudden. Her last three months had been spent convincing herself that life as an unmarried companion, even one clinging to the fringe edge of society, was preferable to being a burden to her brother. Now she was off to London to find a husband? All because Lord de Winter had agreed be her sponsor, of sorts.

But who was he? What did he have to gain by marrying her off? She didn't even know him.

"Why?" she asked him, not hiding her conflicting emotions. "We hadn't met when you devised this plan. Why go to so much trouble for me?"

He barely shrugged, as if the answer was obvious. "Your sister Elinor snatched up the only other bachelor in the area. Call it a sense of preservation for myself." He smiled, all charm and crinkling eyes.

"That's not a real answer," she chided him. "I want to know the

truth." A thought occurred to her. "When *did* you two hatch this plot? This morning?"

Aunt Millie's languid glance at Lord de Winter turned Georgiana's stomach. "We didn't talk about anything this morning, did we?"

Annoyance flickered across his face. "This was arranged weeks ago, Miss Conley. I've already spoken to my staff in London."

Georgiana didn't know if that made it better or worse. It seemed her opinion was of no consequence. They were going to try to marry her off no matter what she said.

Why had Aunt Millie invited her here, if she was just going to turn her out?

Georgiana supposed she'd never have agreed to go to London with her scandalous aunt and make her fall from grace public, had she been asked. She'd been warned Aunt Millie was masterfully cunning. Hadn't Elinor tried to tell her?

But how did Lord de Winter benefit? *Oh, no*. Had he befriended her in the tavern yesterday knowing full well she was his mistress's poor niece?

Had it all been a joke to him?

"Did you know?" she asked accusingly.

He held her gaze. It could have been her imagination, but she had the sense he meant his answer sincerely. "No."

She wanted to believe him. It meant everything to her that their pleasant afternoon had occurred because they'd felt a connection, even if it meant nothing in the end.

Aunt Millie looked between them. She didn't ask what they were talking about. "It will be a grand holiday for you, Georgiana. You've never been to London. You're wearing a ghastly gown. And if you don't fare well, your sister might do better. Shall we make our preparations?"

Georgiana seized on this new, horrible piece of information. She gaped at Aunt Millie. "My sister?"

Chapter 4

THEY TRAVELED PAST the tidy little inn where Georgiana had first met Lord de Winter. In fact, they were forced to return through all the tolls, inns and villages she'd come through just days before.

He rode beside the carriage, weather permitting. She tried admiring the scenery, or working at her embroidery, but her attention always seemed drawn to him seconds after she'd last sworn not to look at him. She seemed condemned to watch the most well-formed man ever created ride a horse in the most elegant way possible.

She tugged her gaze away once more and studied the hoop in her lap. Tangled again! Her small cry of frustration rent the silence.

"It's not your fault, child," her aunt said, in a sultry voice that spoke of knowing too much about the world. "A man like that is meant to be admired."

Georgiana ripped at the stitch. "I can't think what you mean."

Her aunt laughed, then settled deeper against the earl's velvet squabs. "We'll solve that soon enough."

Georgiana would not ask what she meant by *that*.

If watching him ride was difficult, being closeted with him and her aunt together was worse. While their age difference and Aunt Millie's retirement from London limited the number of people they both knew, they still had much in common. They were both well read. They liked to attend operas and the theatre. They'd even traveled the Continent. In different decades, but that only inspired more conversation.

"*Do you have an opinion, Miss Conley?*" was a question she'd begun to dread. Because of course she had not read that book, didn't know whether this character was better played by a male or female actor, wasn't ready to debate the merits of sweet crepes over savory.

"No," she'd say, her jaw clenching tighter each time.

Then she must suffer their sympathetic looks. Aunt Millie would murmur some promise to educate her. Lord de Winter would change the subject. Georgiana would avert her eyes as quickly as possible, so as to feel as little as possible when her aunt and the most heart-wrenchingly beautiful man she'd ever encountered bent their heads closer together.

It was almost—almost—enough to make her look forward to seeing Abigail.

They stopped at the last posting house just before the turnoff to collect the most recent Conley sister to come of age. Mere seconds after Georgiana set down from the carriage, her younger sister's shriek of excitement assaulted her ears.

Abigail, newly eighteen, hastened across the dusty yard to meet them. One gloved hand clutched a felt bonnet to her head. Two untied strings whipped against her throat, when they ought to have been snug beneath her chin.

A flush brightened her face. The spots of color marred an otherwise porcelain complexion. "Georgie! Georgie! I'd begun to fear you'd gone ahead without me! Oh, isn't this the most beautiful carriage? Does it belong to Lord de Winter? Where is he?"

Georgiana sighed inwardly. And so her respite from her family ended. She must resume her role as guardian, sibling above reproach, and model of decorum, lest her sister become any more unmanageable.

"Miss Abigail," Georgiana replied pointedly, quietly enough that no nearby travelers could hear, "ladies do not run. Ladies don't shine with exertion. And ladies certainly don't call out vulgar observations across posting house yards, nor shout the names of gentlemen to whom they have, or have not, been introduced."

Abigail's green eyes laughed up at her. "You've not changed a whit, Georgie. Well, is this carriage his or not? I've heard he's devilish handsome. All the serving girls were beside themselves when I told them I was to be sponsored by the earl. Can you imagine? A London Season! Elinor nearly died for less."

"Abigail!" They were never, ever to discuss Elinor's harebrained attempt to find a husband.

Before Georgiana could say more, or decide if the stabbing in her belly was a reaction to the news that every tavern wench in England seemed familiar with Lord de Winter, their aunt's voice raised over the clatter of another team pulling into the yard. "Your mother said you were a silly girl, Abigail, but she didn't do you justice."

Abigail's mouth dropped at the sight of their aunt, a flamboyant and handsomer replica of their mother.

The older woman swept toward them. Bangle bracelets on her wrists clattered against each other as she tapped her hand on her chest. "I'm no stickler for propriety, and I do have sympathy for naivety. My upbringing was far too sheltered. But I shan't be a laughingstock. Comport yourself as the young woman you are, or consider my invitation rescinded."

Abigail blinked. "But—"

Aunt Millie raised one brilliantly red eyebrow. "Think, child."

Georgiana was almost as stunned as Abigail. No one—not their mother or their brother, and certainly not herself, had ever managed to make Abigail speechless.

No one had ever applied such leverage as a London Season, though.

Wisely, Abigail clasped her hands together and nodded. "Yes, Aunt Mildred."

"Gah, no, not that. Do I look a hundred years old? Aunt Millie will do."

"Yes, Aunt Millie." Abigail's eyes gleamed with mischief. She'd known better, the minx.

Georgiana prayed for patience. "I hope you haven't been waiting long," she said, taking her sister's arm. "Are you rested enough to move on?"

"She's terrifying!" Abigail squeaked as soon as they were out of earshot. "How ever have you managed?"

"Just do as she says. I suppose I ought to also warn you about Lord de Winter," she began, but was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a dozen or more harried-looking tavern workers spilling into the yard.

They lined up quickly in order of apparent rank, with the broad-chested innkeeper and his gray-haired wife flanked by their footmen, cook, maids, serving girls, and so on, all the way down to the chimney sweep. The innkeeper's wife belatedly yanked off her apron and thrust it behind her.

Georgiana and Abigail looked at each other. What was this about?

Lord de Winter rode up on his horse. He leapt to the ground. Abigail gasped unabashedly, despite Aunt Millie's warning, and Georgiana tried not to consume him with her eyes. He cut such a fine figure in his greatcoat. Even his tousled hair and dusty breeches caused her insides to melt with longing, when nothing about him—nothing!—should ever make her feel desire.

He was an earl, far above her reach.

And he was her aunt's lover.

"He is everything a man ought to be," Abigail whispered breathlessly. "Do you think he has a sister?"

Chapter 5

THERE WERE MORE SUBTLE WAYS to block his sister's machinations than by bringing home three women, two respectable, one not.

Stephan Laurent, Lord de Winter, was long past subtleties. An army of women might not be enough to protect him. If his last altercation with Cassandra was anything to go by, his sister wasn't going to allow any obstacle to come between her and her plan to wed him off to the richest woman who'd take him.

But he had to try.

There hadn't been room for him in his carriage after they'd acquired Miss Abigail Conley at his busiest posting house. Every inch of his body ached after so many days of riding. Dust had found a way into even the tightest folds of his linen, and his stomach rumbled loudly whenever he thought about the prospect of a hot meal.

But he couldn't go up to his rooms just yet. Millie knew about his sister and their longstanding dispute. Her nieces did not.

As soon as his footman set down the steps and opened the carriage door, Stephan moved forward to help his guests onto the cobblestone street. Millie arched a brow knowingly as she alighted, silent commiseration for what lay ahead. That was why he'd invited her; he needed an ally. If only she'd cease rubbing their connection in Miss Conley's face. It clearly made her niece uncomfortable.

He found himself wishing he hadn't agreed to one final liaison with her before they turned their focus to the Marriage Mart. And he should have been wary when she'd playfully stolen his clothes. Why the devil had he allowed her to thrust him into the corridor naked?

He may never find out. She wouldn't say.

Miss Abigail emerged next, bonnet askew. "What a lovely townhouse, my lord! It must cost a fortune to let."

"I hope you enjoy your stay, Miss Abigail," he answered indulgently as he handed her down, not the least surprised she'd speak so. Millie had warned him her nieces were country chits. Trouble was, Miss Abigail had struck a sore spot. The house was more than he could afford. After this Season, he and Cassandra must find alternate arrangements, or retire to their family estate in York.

Cassandra would never go to Gillygate.

He turned his assistance to Miss Conley. This time, he needn't force a polite smile. Her eyes shot such fire at Miss Abigail's back, it was a wonder her sister wasn't smote in the street.

Miss Conley realized his amusement and schooled her features into the governess facade he'd come to see as her usual state. In her mind, this was an improvement over looking daggers at her sister, but he preferred emotion of any kind to this mask.

"My sister vexes me, too," he murmured as he handed her down.

She looked sharply at him. "I'm perfectly composed."

He chuckled.

"You were too kind to her," Georgiana admonished him. "She needs to learn she can't fawn over other people's possessions."

"It's easy to avoid disagreements when it's not your relation," he replied. "I'm not as lenient with my own sister. You'll see."

Almost imperceptibly, Miss Conley's eyes widened. Then she stopped walking and looked at him. "Does *she* know about *us*?"

"I don't need her permission," he said, defensive.

"As you say, my lord. But I'd have liked to know we were about to meet her. Especially if she has no idea we're coming. How pleased will she be about hosting your mistress and her family? The scandal!"

In truth, he'd been reluctant to explain his sister to Miss Conley. And he knew very well Cass wouldn't be happy about his guests, though not for the reason Miss Conley believed.

Egad, he felt that word in his gut. *Mistress*. He didn't want Miss Conley to think he and Millie were more involved than they were. "She's not my mistress," he said.

Miss Conley looked askance at him. "Call it what you like. Your sister won't be pleased to have her reputation shredded."

"Cass doesn't bend to gossip," he replied, understating that situation completely. "She spares no thought for niceties. It's you who should prepare yourself."

"Are you trying to scare me?"

"Not at all," he said ominously. "The trick is to remember you're my guest, and I'm the earl. She can't toss you on your ear no matter what she says."

"Are you reminding me or yourself, my lord?" Miss Conley couldn't seem to help herself; she smirked.

It was by far the most devastating of her expressions thus far. That upturned corner of her mouth. The glint of mischief in her eyes. And, oh, the recovery. She wiped it away so quickly, she'd clearly shared more of herself than she'd meant to do.

Riling her was quickly becoming his favorite pastime. He'd been entranced from the start. Miss Conley had polished her manners so

thoroughly, she'd rounded off all the interesting edges. But if he worked hard enough at it, she gave him a glimpse of her true form.

And then there was the hungry way she stared at him when she thought he wasn't looking.

"Lady Cassandra would take me straight to the Devil if she could," he said, showing Miss Conley into the house. "I think they're on good terms."

Miss Conley looked up at the painted ceiling above them, then at the wide staircase that split at the first landing. Her aunt and sister were still standing in the foyer, flanked by servants awaiting orders. Then she looked at him, and he realized she was trying not to laugh.

He needed nothing more than that. He puffed up like a king. "Woods, show my guests to the Garden rooms."

"As you wish, my lord." The eager young man leapt into action.

"Dinner is at half eight," he called to their backs.

Miss Conley paused to look over her shoulder. "Send Lady Cassandra my regards. I look forward to meeting her."

One of his servants coughed.

Stephan laughed. Miss Conley had a cutting sense of humor. If she didn't manage to obstruct Cassandra, at least he'd be entertained. Perhaps he'd come to have two allies in the house.

Just one almost certainly wasn't enough.

Chapter 6

DURING THE LONG, dark period that had followed their mother's demise, Stephan had come to believe he'd never see his sister again. He'd built her up in his mind until she'd become a memory who could do no wrong. Some of his friends questioned whether she'd perished in truth, for he'd been unable to speak of her, even to those who knew him well.

She was his only surviving family, and he'd driven her away. Their father had died long before. Ironically, it had been his fear of being left alone that had caused him to treat her so poorly. His guilt had nearly consumed him.

Then one day many, many years later, she'd found him. In his favorite coffeehouse, trying to blunt the effects of too much brandy. He'd had the shock of his life upon seeing her. His friends had gawped, too, as she'd laid out her demands in no uncertain terms. And then she'd moved into his London residence, and waited.

He'd spent almost every day since trying to make amends. Trouble was, he simply owed her too much.

He found her where she always was when at home: in his library, drinking his best whiskey, a cheroot clamped between her lips as she pored over their bare accounts.

She glanced up as he entered. "What fresh hell have you embroiled us in this time? Three houseguests, really? When you know all we have to share with them with is dust?"

"I've asked you not to smoke in the library." He took a seat across from her and leaned back. The tightly bunched muscles at the base of his spine cried in relief, even as the rest of him tensed for a fight.

She stubbed out the cheroot and tossed it onto a pile of similarly discarded end pieces mounding on a tin salver. "It doesn't matter anymore. We can't afford tobacco. Tell me you have a plan. You've come up with a brilliant stratagem, and these women aren't the dead weight they appear at first glance."

Fitting that she didn't even consider them marriage prospects. Cass cared only about rich women, from what he'd seen. "They'll cover their costs. We've enough space in this house, God knows. It's not as if

I'm asking you to attend outings with them. Just be civil."

Cassandra drummed her ink-stained fingers against the top of his desk as she silently wished him to Hell. Egad, he'd give almost anything for her not to be mad at him. They were siblings. The only people they had left were each other.

Wisps of brown hair framed her face, escaping the long, messy braid plaited beneath her ubiquitous tricorn hat. Her shirtsleeves billowed from the confines of a fitted waistcoat. He didn't need to see the bottom half of her to know she was garbed in breeches. Since her return from the Continent, he'd yet to see her in a dress.

As with her other eccentricities, they hadn't discussed her costume. Wherever she spent her time away from home didn't seem to require ladies' attire.

"Why them?" she asked at last. "Have you impregnated one? The youngest chit, I presume."

"No! Good Lord, Cass." He'd loosely hoped she'd assume he was madly in love with Millie. Then maybe she'd let off her notion of marrying him to a fat pocketbook.

She shifted under the desk, crossing her scuffed Hessians. The toe of her boot kicked him in the knee. "Good. We can't afford another mouth to feed. Are you at least charging them for their rooms?"

He gave her an exasperated look.

"What kind of innkeeper are you?" she taunted.

She knew just how to needle him. "Not everything is about money," he said testily.

"So speaks the man who gambled away his sister's dowry."

That wasn't a needle. It was a broadsword.

"Cass, for the love of God, please stop reminding me."

She glared at him. After a bit, she relented. "Did you collect the payments while you were gone? We need to buy next year's seed. It will take time to distribute it to all the farmers, especially the new ones. Planting must begin on schedule."

"I've been back and forth to York for the past two months. What do you think I've been doing?"

Her lips tightened. "You don't want to know."

No, he didn't. Her lack of faith in him, while warranted, hurt him to his core.

He was the earl. He was her brother. She ought to be able to depend on him.

Exasperated with her and angry with himself, he blew out a breath. Patience was his strongest suit. He just wasn't used to being attacked without being able to shrug and walk away.

He'd never turn his back on his sister. In spite of their disagreements, he worshipped her. She was the strongest woman he

knew.

"I have the money. I've even made arrangements to have the seed delivered by the end of the week. We'll be ready for spring."

She narrowed her eyes. "You had enough to cover the seed without a loan?"

He nodded. "There was even enough for urgent repairs at the brewhouse."

She held her hand out, palm up. "I want my cut."

A short laugh exploded from him. "You're mad, you know that?"

She dropped her hand and settled back in her chair. Disdain radiated from her. "You don't know what it's like. My lot, tied to yours. You, barely demonstrating the self-control of a boy."

"Your faith in me is noted."

She scowled. "Is it any wonder?"

"No," he answered honestly.

She rolled her eyes and looked away. "You make it so difficult to hate you."

He exhaled softly. How many years had he hoped for her return? Only for her to show up demanding money he didn't have, and despising him for losing what should have been hers.

At least she was here. After three years, they could almost hold a conversation. He wasn't angry with her for loathing him. He couldn't be. After their mother's collapse from apoplexy, he and Cass ought to have leaned on each other. Instead, he'd been too young and stupid to realize she was all he had.

Hindsight, and all that. Though he should have been prepared to manage his own affairs, seeing as he'd been the earl since childhood, he'd quickly learned he'd been cossetted. Without his mother's influence to guide him, he'd been terrified of the responsibility of his title.

And so he'd been reckless. Cassandra had accused him of purposefully destroying their life. She'd said he meant to prove he didn't deserve to be the earl. Then she'd left, and he'd been more alone than ever.

Never again.

Finally, she lolled her head back to face him. She laced her fingers over the brass buckle decorating her waistband. "Have you looked at the list I left for you?"

"Yes," he said. "I don't know any of them."

"Then drag yourself to one of the balls you're always being invited to and beg an introduction. Ride your horse through Hyde Park and admire their hats. Start with the wealthiest debutante and work your way down. Honestly, Stephan. Am I to woo the chits myself?"

He almost laughed. "Could you?"

She growled. "If only!" Then she leaned forward, her ink-tipped fingers gripping the edge of the desk. "I'm tired of waiting for your taverns to become profitable. It's been three years! I want to return to France. Hurry up and take a rich wife. You're the only one of us who can."

He sighed, wishing he could snap his fingers and make her happy. "Word is spreading. My ale is becoming all the rage. Have patience, please. It's a matter of time."

She rummaged through his desk, then smacked a sheet of paper in front of him. "Go find your ladies. It won't take much. I don't care if you have to marry an ugly dragon of a woman or a terrible shrew. I want the money Mother set aside for me."

Stephan ground his jaw, feeling every ounce of exhaustion he'd been staving off the last few days. He knew she was right. He just hated that his stupidity had put them both in this position.

Cass glared back at him, not the least concerned by his weariness.

"I hate you for doing this to me," she said under her breath.

Stephan did, too.

Chapter 7

“THIS ISN’T A PLACE respectable young women should be, is it?”

Abigail asked no one in particular. She stood beside Georgiana as they surveyed the haze-filled salon with Aunt Millie. Men of every age and station debated each other with tumblers of amber liquid and cheroots in hand. The few women in attendance alternated between loose-robed bohemians, like Aunt Millie, and those who could most charitably be described as “in trade.”

Aunt Millie had already availed herself of a thimbleful of sherry. She raised the empty glass to the room, where heads had begun to swivel in their direction. “If mothers don’t think this place fit, it’s to our benefit. All men, even disreputable men, need wives.”

“Not all men, Aunt Millie.” Abigail raised her chin to indicate a pair of dandies to her left. “Those two don’t want a petticoat in the way.”

Georgiana almost did the unthinkable and peered around Abigail. Catching herself before she gawped openly, she sneaked a discrete look.

The two men made a striking pair, one tall and golden, the other dark and somber. They stood so close, barely any light passed between them as they argued quietly.

The dour one sighed in defeat. He touched the other man’s arm. His hand lingered a fraction too long before he turned and walked away.

Georgiana, always quick with a reprimand for her younger sister, found herself speechless. Her etiquette books hadn’t prepared her with a ready rebuke for accusations of sodomy.

Aunt Millie’s eyes sparkled. She looked Abigail up and down, as if taking her measure anew. “I stand corrected, child. There are exceptions to every rule.”

Georgiana turned to leave. “This is a place of ill repute!”

“Nonsense,” Aunt Millie said, staying her with a hand. “This salon is dedicated to enlightenment. Men—and women,” she gave Abigail a pointed look, “with their own notions of love don’t make a gathering illicit. If they did, nowhere would be acceptable. Come now and meet

my friend. Madame Claremont has promised to introduce us to men who *are* in need of wives.”

What to do? Georgiana felt herself sinking into quicksand with Aunt Millie. On the one hand, no matter what her aunt claimed, this was not a place one normally searched for a husband. On the other, neither Georgiana nor Abigail were likely to be invited anywhere better.

Aunt Millie might have a point. Husbands could be found anywhere one chose to look.

Grudgingly, she allowed her aunt to lead them deeper into the house. They found their hostess holding court in a large library. It wasn't the woman reclining on a chaise longue that captured Georgiana's attention, however. The books! Madame Claremont owned more books than Georgiana could browse in a lifetime. More than she'd even known existed.

Abigail and Aunt Millie continued toward Madame, but Georgiana hung back. She wasn't an avid reader, yet even she wanted to draw her fingertip along all the pretty, gold leaf bindings.

“I'd no idea a library could elicit such a reaction from a woman,” an oh-so-familiar voice drawled in her ear. “I'd have braved my sister to show you ours.”

Georgiana spun to face Lord de Winter. He was supposed to be at Almack's. She hadn't expected to see him tonight, let alone freshly bathed and clad in an even more form-fitting pair of breeches than the ones he'd worn that first day.

She set aside a vision of him steaming in his tub, head thrown back against a rolled towel, droplets of bath water glistening along his throat. “Is your library this grand?” she stammered.

Since *he* wasn't imagining her at her bath, his voice didn't waver. “More so, though I merely let the house so I can't say it's mine. You're welcome to use it. There's a copy of Debrett's Peerage that might be of some use to you.”

The back of her neck warmed with embarrassment. “I'm no title-hunter, my lord.”

His answering grin was devastating. “In that case, you may want to know who to avoid.”

This man! He was as charming as he was beautiful.

His grin brightened further. Likely, he knew how difficult it was for her not to smile back. “If you do need to view Debrett's, Cassandra keeps a dog-eared copy on the desk. You and I may have no interest in baronetcies, earldoms and the like, but she's memorized the entire Ten Thousand.”

“Oh? Is she husband hunting?”

He pivoted to fall in beside her. He clasped his arms behind his

back as he surveyed the room. "Wife hunting. Determinedly, with a vigor usually reserved for mothers with too many daughters."

Georgiana darted a sidelong glance at him. Well, her look was meant to be brief. She lingered too long on the slant of his jaw, the nape of his neck, and the crisp tucks of his cravat. He'd sidled so close to her, their shoulders almost brushed.

His spicy scent enveloped her. Smoky, with a hint of warmth.

She ought not to know what he smelled like.

She ought not to know what he *looked* like.

Naked.

"Is your *sister* trying to marry you off?" Georgiana finally managed, long after it must have become obvious to him that she was completely under his spell.

Those dark eyes skimmed along her profile before he returned to his perusal of the room. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled.

"It's usually the other way around, isn't it?" he asked.

She forced herself to stare straight ahead. What were they discussing? Her wits fled her, merely because he'd glanced her way.

"I'm sure she wants you to make a good connection," Georgiana managed. "Her lot being tied to yours, at least until she marries, I mean."

"An interesting choice of words," he mused. "Have you spoken to her?"

Georgiana shook her head. "I've not had the pleasure."

He grimaced. "Truly, you have no idea what you're saying."

She almost felt sorry for him. It seemed his sister was a constant source of frustration for him. "That's true. Is she avoiding us? It's been two days since we arrived, yet I haven't so much as encountered her in a corridor."

"Another interesting choice of words," he drawled.

Georgiana blanched, remembering her encounter with him in a corridor, and everything that entailed. "Oh, stop. You do know what I mean."

He chuckled, enjoying her discomfort. "She could be avoiding you," he agreed. "I hardly see her, myself. If she does decide to make an appearance, she might not be the lady you expect. Gird yourself, Miss Conley. I know how easily you're offended."

Georgiana felt indignant on Lady Cassandra's behalf. Surely, he shouldn't discuss her in such terms. "Do you air your dirty linen with every stranger you meet?"

His lips quirked. "Not many ask after my personal affairs."

Touché.

"I suppose I deserved that," she acknowledged. "But if I'm being forward, I'd rather have the answer to a different question. Why on

earth did you agree to bring me to London, sight unseen? Did Aunt Millie coerce you? Do you owe her a favor?"

"Nothing like that." He waited, as if to see whether that was enough. Yet it was only the start of what she wanted to know.

Finally, he broke. "The truth is, I asked her to join me in London before I knew you existed."

"Oh." She tried not to feel disappointed. Regardless of whether or not he'd known of her existence, he hadn't met her yet. He'd hardly made his offer out of any soft feelings for her.

Then she tried to understand why he'd invite Aunt Millie to Town with him. "Ohhhh," she breathed, mortified. "Have I interrupted your plans for a tryst?"

"Egad, woman, does that mind of yours never need a respite?" He chuckled and shook his head. "No, no, I didn't bring her here for that sort of company. She asked to end that aspect of our friendship, actually, though she seems to delight in lording the past over you."

Georgiana almost gasped aloud. Was it true he and Aunt Millie had ended their liaison? It felt like someone loosened her stays, and suddenly she could breathe again.

He cleared his throat, as if embarrassed to continue. "The thing is, my sister has been up my arse for years about taking a wife. She won't wait any longer. I invited Millie because I didn't want to face Cass entirely alone and I didn't want to choose a wife by myself. But," he added, "I don't mind that you've come."

"How polite of you to say so." Georgiana bit her tongue. He was trying to be kind about her tagging along.

Two buxom women strolled by. One offered Lord de Winter a long, inviting look as she passed.

Jealousy flared through Georgiana. She couldn't help but ask, "Are you looking for a wife *here*?"

He glanced at her, one brow lifted. "Almack's, according to the schedule of *ton* events my sister devised. Tepid place. I couldn't stay above an hour. I was far more interested to know how your come-out was progressing."

Her heart slammed into her chest. "You were?"

He nodded.

She didn't know what to say. But then she remembered: not only was he in the process of taking a wife, he'd confirmed he and Aunt Millie had indeed been conducting an *affaire* until mere days ago.

Thinking about it made her ill. No wonder she'd set it as far from her mind as possible.

Somehow, she needed to purge herself of her infatuation with him. He was entirely unsuitable for her. "How long were you and Aunt Millie...?"

He stiffened, apparently uncomfortable with her question. "Approximately a year."

A year! She almost doubled over.

At least this was working. She couldn't fall in love with her aunt's castoff lover. She shouldn't even lust after him.

She asked him another question, one that had been burning since she'd first learned of the *affaire*. "Why?"

Again, he seemed to know what she meant without her having to elaborate. "I don't know."

"How can that be?" Georgiana shook her head, frustrated he'd demur. She didn't need coddling. "Surely there is some feature, a characteristic or—or reason you took up with her."

He shrugged, as Aunt Millie liked to do. "I couldn't say."

"I don't believe you." Georgiana knew she was being rude but she couldn't seem to help it. A year was an age. Especially when every woman in this room had attempted to lock eyes with him at one point or another. There must be a reason he'd chosen Aunt Millie.

"You two seem quite comfortable," she tried again, though he clearly wished she'd cease badgering him.

He half-turned and raised one eyebrow. "You've been reading too many *Ladies' Companions*, Miss Conley."

She warmed at the reminder that he knew her secret. Nevertheless, she pressed past his attempt to set her down. "I just want to understand. There must be a reason you were entangled with my aunt. Do you love her? Did she love you?"

"No," he replied succinctly.

Rather unsatisfying, as far as answers went, even if it was what Georgiana wanted to hear. It provided no insight into the basis for their attachment.

She considered what she knew so far. If it wasn't love, and he couldn't name a single trait he admired in her aunt, why did he keep returning? What did Aunt Millie have that drew the interest of a virile lord who could have anyone?

Money.

Aunt Millie had one thing, and both Georgiana and Lord de Winter wanted it.

"You're a fortune hunter," Georgiana breathed, realizing what should have occurred to her from the start. No wonder his sister was anxious for him to wed. Their accounts were empty.

His head snapped up. "Pardon me?"

She said it louder. "You're a fortune hunter."

He half-turned to her again. She thought he'd finally erupt. Instead, he bent closer to her ear. "Yes, I am."

She gaped at him.

He stood back. "I need a rich wife. So do most of the men in this room. Or in any room, at any party. *You* need a husband. You don't want him to be destitute, do you? We could all do with a little more blunt in our pocketbook."

Her mind reeled. What he'd said was vulgar, but it wasn't untrue.

Why was she so surprised he'd answered honestly?

A little voice inside her said, *All of his answers have been truthful.*

"No," she admitted. "I suppose I'm not here to marry for love, either."

Then she recalled what had prompted her to speak out in the first place. "If you aren't in love with my aunt, yet it appears you can easily find companionship elsewhere, and you're looking for a wealthy wife, it seems fair to conclude you've set your sights on Aunt Millie's coffers. Do I have it right, now?"

He cast her an exasperated look. "May I point out that all this sleuthing isn't finding you any suitors of your own?"

Her stays seemed to tighten again. He didn't love Aunt Millie. Georgiana believed he'd say so, if he did. But he didn't deny he might marry her aunt, if she'd have him.

If being the operative word.

Georgiana began to assemble the bits and pieces she'd pried from him tonight. He'd brought Aunt Millie to London when he knew he was supposed to be selecting an heiress from the *ton*. He'd couched his offer as friendship, so Aunt Millie would drop her guard. He'd given her the reins to the city, and invited her to make herself at home in his house. It stood to reason he hoped she'd be swayed by the place she loved most.

Georgiana had to think her aunt wasn't the sort to swoon over a proposal, even one from Lord de Winter. But she might be lured by Town.

"Are you going to ask Aunt Millie to marry you?" Georgiana asked. Even as she did, she realized what that would mean for her. No position as her aunt's companion. No inheritance.

No freedom.

"I'm not marrying anyone at the moment," Lord de Winter pointed out. "What about you?"

"This isn't about me."

"Ah, but I disagree," he said. "This entire outing is about you finding a husband. Insofar as I can tell, you haven't looked at another man."

Georgiana almost expired on the spot. She blushed furiously. How could he say that aloud? She wanted to drop through the floor. "I've been watching the assembly, same as you."

"Then you haven't seen anyone," he murmured.

She felt his words all the way to her toes.

Before she could make sense of *that*, he continued, “Fortunately for you, I know a man in search of a wife who isn’t likely to be overly choosy about her dowry or connections. He isn’t even one hundred years old. Would you like an introduction?”

Oh, that was a blow. The only thing worse than Lord de Winter wedding Aunt Millie and usurping Georgiana’s inheritance was Lord de Winter marrying her off to one of his friends.

“Why didn’t you say so sooner?” she asked suspiciously, as she pulled herself together. Lord de Winter wasn’t going to marry her, no matter what happened with Aunt Millie. He was a fortune hunter, and all she owned was a valise bursting with ancient *Ladies’ Companions*. “Is he here?”

“Yes, he’s in that corner, staring at you. But I was having a perfectly lovely time, weren’t you?”

Good heavens, the most mundane words from him could slice through her like a knife. How did she interpret anything, when everything he said seemed intended to either flatter or confuse her?

Lord de Winter motioned toward a young buck engaged in conversation with the two men Abigail had pointed out earlier. “Mr. Rowland is studying to become a clergyman. As the youngest of three brothers, he’s unlikely to inherit a title. Like most rakes, he’ll make a dutiful husband, once he settles down.” Lord de Winter crooked his arm toward her. “Shall we meet him?”

Mr. Rowland’s animated expression seemed open and friendly. A youthful glow surrounded him, making her feel dowdy by comparison.

Lord de Winter made her feel...

It really didn’t matter, did it? She must stop wasting her thoughts on Lord de Winter. He was an unabashed fortune hunter who’d all but admitted he had his eye on her inheritance. What more reason did she need?

Chapter 8

MR. ROWLAND BRIGHTENED with interest as Stephan led Miss Conley to the group clustered in the corner.

Stephan smoothed a frown from his face. Of course Rowland was intrigued. Miss Conley wasn't a classic London beauty. She didn't glide. Her neck didn't arch like a delicate swan's. Her frock might have been faded, or the color was meant to be muted—impossible to tell. But a new face was a novelty, and Miss Conley was pretty enough. Especially when she wasn't scowling.

Especially when her eyes drank in Stephan like he was the only man she'd ever seen.

He mustn't think of that. In the time since he'd left Cassandra in the library, filled with self-loathing for stealing her dowry from her, he'd decided she was right. He was going to have to marry someone wealthy, and sooner than he liked.

Dutifully, he'd been attending the events she'd selected for him. But his heart wasn't in them. He was too concerned about Millie and Miss Conley gallivanting around town to pay attention to the young ladies he'd asked to dance. What if Miss Conley needed his help?

Lord Steepleton, a notorious busybody, looked down his long nose and sniffed disdainfully as Stephan drew up with Miss Conley. He'd been on the outs with Steepleton since he'd helped their mutual friend roust a party of revelers who'd overstayed their welcome. Steepleton and Mr. Tewseybury had been two of the ejected guests.

"Playing nursemaid tonight?" Lord Steepleton taunted. One finger crooked beneath his chin. He stared at a point somewhere behind Stephan's head, as if lost in a thought more important than the conversation he'd initiated.

Stephan rolled his eyes. The man's ennui was exhausting.

Mr. Tewseybury, Lord Steepleton's genial counterpart, smiled warmly at Miss Conley. "You must be the niece we've heard so much about. I'm Mr. Tewseybury. I beg your understanding as I go in search of the retiring room." He bowed and left the group.

Mr. Rowland turned a leg too extravagantly to be anything but a bid for attention. "This must be *the* Miss Conley we've been waiting to

meet. The pleasure is mine.”

Stephan ground his teeth. Laying it on thick there, even for a rake.

He forced himself to calm. The sooner Miss Conley found a suitor, the sooner he could go back to wife hunting. That was what he'd decided he must do, wasn't it?

He swore under his breath. *Anything* was preferable to trawling London for a bride.

He recalled Miss Conley's erroneous conclusion that he intended to woo Millie and her small fortune. The thought hadn't occurred to him, but he had to admit it fit. He'd much rather marry the devil he knew than one of his sister's choosing. But how to propose to the woman who'd set him aside?

At the moment, he needed to focus on Miss Conley's marital prospects. No matter how he looked at it, she didn't figure into his plans.

“Miss Conley,” he said, making the introductions necessary to send her on her way, “these two gadabouts are Mr. Thaddeus Rowland and Lord Steepleton.”

Miss Conley's curtesy wouldn't do in Court, but this was only Madame Claremont's Salon. “You know who I am?” she asked Rowland, in that blunt way she had of speaking what was on her mind.

Rowland's sheepish smile attempted to walk back his overly flamboyant greeting. “I couldn't help but ask Lord Steepleton if he knew the identity of the lovely woman on Mrs. Rebmann's arm.”

“You must mean my sister,” Miss Conley replied. “Miss Abigail Conley.”

Mr. Rowland gazed directly into her eyes. “No.”

Stephan pulled a face.

She seemed to stand a little taller. Was she really falling for that? She'd seemed like such a sensible woman.

“Care to walk with me?” Rowland asked her, which was precisely what Stephan had meant to happen when he'd escorted her over. So why did he feel so annoyed?

Because he'd thought she had more sense!

His gaze tracked Miss Conley's svelte form as she marched away on Rowland's arm. With so many witnesses, Rowland wouldn't try anything improper. Would he?

“She's not the usual sort who clings to you,” Steepleton drawled, angling closer to Stephan. “Let me guess: you don't want anything from her. Why, she's practically a sister.” He smirked.

Stephan grimaced. “Why must you be so irritating?”

“Me?” Steepleton made a great show of inspecting his coat sleeve. “Is it my fault if people don't like their innermost thoughts spoken

aloud?"

Stephan ignored the earl. What was Rowland thinking? He was taking an obvious path toward the open balcony door.

Miss Conley appeared unaware of their destination. Rowland wasn't so desperate for a wife that he needed to compromise a young woman to get one. Which meant he didn't consider Miss Conley someone whose reputation needed to be protected.

Stephan tensed as he decided whether or not he ought to retrieve her. She was welcome to stroll with whomever she liked, wherever she liked. What mattered was her intention. He knew she hadn't come tonight in search of seduction.

Should he intervene?

"There'll be talk no matter what you do," Lord Steepleton pointed out. "If you fetch her, Rowland will tell everyone. He'll say you want her for yourself."

"You're already saying that."

Five more steps. Miss Conley must have noticed the open door by now. Rowland leaned close and said something that caused her to look askance at him. Her brows raised with intrigue.

Stephan forced himself to maintain his composure—what was left, anyway. But when a hint of color came to her cheeks, he couldn't help himself. He stepped forward.

He'd introduced them. It was his duty to ensure she came to no harm.

"I knew you were more angel than devil," Steepleton said to his back. "You've always been too soft-hearted for my liking."

"Good," Stephan said, walking away.

The drawing room was too large, and crowded enough to prevent him from saving her before she was whisked through the balcony door. He strode after her and walked directly up to a potted fern nestled in the balcony's darkened corner, where Rowland had somehow already secluded Miss Conley behind the fronds.

She gasped as Stephan wedged himself into their private space. "What are you doing?" she reprimanded him.

"Having a respite." He shouldered in front of Rowland, then leaned back against the balcony railing and withdrew a slim cheroot case from his coat pocket.

The smaller man gaped, too stunned to argue. Whatever he'd been planning, it hadn't included Stephan wedged between him and Miss Conley.

Stephan offered him a rolled cheroot. "Smoke?"

Rowland declined. It seemed to un-muddle his thoughts. "This is a private viewing, my lord. I was just telling Miss Conley the night might be clear enough to see the meteor shower."

"Have I missed it?" Stephan made a point of looking at the sky.

"Er..." Rowland pouted like a child whose sweetmeat had been taken away. "Appears it's not dark enough, after all. How unfortunate."

"Indeed." Stephan barely kept from smiling as he cupped his hand around the cheroot and lit it. He exhaled with satisfaction, sending a puff of fragrant smoke into the air.

Miss Conley leaned away. She waved her hand in front of her face. "Why must men do that?"

Stephan was more careful this time, exhaling over his shoulder. The low cloud crept across the garden below.

He was just about to answer her with a smart retort when Rowland took Miss Conley's hand, bent over it, and murmured, "It's been divine, Miss Conley." Before she could object, he pivoted and disappeared back into the house.

She turned on Stephan. "You chased him away!"

"I did no such thing." He drew on the cheroot.

It crackled and glowed in the darkness like her eyes, flashing at him in anger. "You did! How can you stand there and pretend you did nothing wrong? Things were going swimmingly, until you showed up like a—a *governess*—"

He laughed.

"I liked him!" She stepped forward and poked Stephan in the chest. It caught him off-guard and he inhaled on his cheroot too sharply. He sputtered and coughed as smoke burned his lungs.

She stood back and folded her arms, heedless of his graceless choking fit. "You shouldn't have done that. Now he'll tell everyone I'm under your protection."

Stephan gasped for air. "That doesn't mean what you think it means."

But she was good and worked up. She continued as if she hadn't heard him. "I'll never have another suitor! Who would stand up to an earl?" She glared at him. "Why make introductions at all, if you were just going to ruin everything?"

He drew in several lungfuls of cool night air. When he was finally able to breathe normally again, he replied, "A gentleman with honest intentions wouldn't seduce you in plain sight of everyone. I've saved your reputation."

She shot him a disbelieving look. "Poppycock. Mr. Rowland and I were having a boring conversation about dinner when I asked if he thought the meteor shower might be visible from London."

"This was your idea?" Stephan shook his head, then raised his cheroot and took a tentative draw. The air between them filled with smoke as he exhaled.

She frowned deeply at him. "Must you do that now? I thought you were about to die a moment ago."

Obligingly, Stephan stubbed out his cheroot and laid it on the railing. She sighed at his clear intention to relight it as soon as she was gone, but she didn't object.

"A 'thank you' would have sufficed," he said, provoking her.

She huffed at his audacity. "I'll *thank you* not to blow smoke in my face. *Thank you very much* for not causing my hair and clothing to reek. *I'm so appreciative* that you're willing to show a modicum of respect for another human being—"

He put up his hands in defense. "Yes, yes, I'm in the wrong. I'm sorry, Miss Conley. It wasn't considerate of me."

She gave him a long, exasperated look. "This entire evening has been a waste of time. Now I must wash my hair, on top of it. But I suspect you know nothing of the magnitude of that undertaking."

"I'm sorry! What more can I say?"

She smoothed her hands over her plain frock. "Well. I may be overreacting. It's just that I did like him. Now what do I do?"

He did his best to appear as chastened as he felt. "I truly feared for your virtue."

A flush stained her cheeks, visible even on this darkened balcony. For the barest instant, she glanced at the floor. "Thank you."

"Now I have a question for you," he said. Partly to divert her attention, and partly because she'd made him curious. "Do you think I reek?"

Her eyes turned to saucers. She looked like she might leap off the balcony. A bolt of awareness shot through him. Because she didn't think he stank of stale cheroots. But she was deeply aware of his scent. The truth was written all over her face.

What was he going to do about it?

As if he had no control over his own limbs, he slowly straightened. In the stillness, her breath hitched.

The tiniest puff of air expelled between her lips. "What are you doing?"

He grasped her elbows, then leaned close, until wisps of her chignon tickled his nose. "Finding out if I've ruined your hair."

She didn't move.

Neither did he.

"Well?" Her voice was but a whisper.

"I can't tell," he murmured.

A half-laughed bubbled from her. She didn't move. "Perhaps you should try again."

His pulse sped faster. He allowed his thumbs to caress the insides of her elbows. When she didn't object, he lowered his head until his

cheek rested against her temple.

Her skin was blazing hot.

The knowledge emboldened him.

"I don't know what you normally smell like," he admitted. "And I've probably gone numb to the stench of stale cheroot. But I can tell you this: right now, you smell like heaven."

Her whole countenance stilled.

He nuzzled her hair. Silken strands caressed his face. It was all he could do not to reach up and pull the pins from her chignon, for suddenly, he ached to know more. Was it long? Thick? How would it feel threaded between his fingers? Did it curl just a bit at the ends, or was it as straight and unyielding as its owner?

Lavender, he decided. Lavender and just a touch of mint.

"I want you to kiss me," she whispered, sending flames through his body. "Please."

"Miss Conley, I couldn't." But he didn't release her. "I can't believe you even asked."

She tried to pull away. "Forget I said that."

He held her tightly and inhaled again. The more she sank toward him, so that the rise and fall of her breasts brushed his chest, the more he desired her.

"Impossible," he said against her hair. "I'm too much of a rogue."

"Yes," she replied, too quickly.

"I've frightened you."

"No."

In all this time, it had never occurred to him that she'd want to make good on those longing looks.

Slowly, he pulled away so he could see her upturned face. Another bolt of lust shot through him. Thick, black lashes rested against moonlit cheeks. Pink lips, parted just enough to be tantalizing, seemed primed for his kiss.

She'd asked, hadn't she? And he never turned down a lady.

He released one of her elbows so he could cup her face. Her breasts heaved with the force of her indrawn breath. But her eyes didn't open.

"Georgiana." Her name rumbled from him.

Stubbornly, she kept her lids lowered. "Mmhhh."

"I'm going to kiss you, after all."

A heartbeat passed. Then, "I'm throwing caution to the wind," she whispered.

Her humorous reply undid him. He slid one hand around the back of her neck, then hauled her against his body with the other. His mouth crashed down on hers, taking, even as the thought flickered through his mind that this might be her first kiss and he ought to be gentle.

It was too late. He'd pretended not to understand her ravenous stares for so long. She desired him, and possibly had done from the first moment they'd met.

His tongue sought the hot depths of her mouth, sliding against hers, imitating a dance she almost certainly knew nothing about.

She melted into him. Her hands gripped his coat as if her legs had ceased holding her upright. He kissed her again, deeper still, his fingers digging into her stays. It was all he could do not to reach for her breast, but in some lagging part of his brain, he knew that would go too far.

Steam rose up as their breaths turned to moans. His length hardened between them. Prim Miss Conley desired him. *Him*.

She pressed against him, her whole body sealed to his. Her tongue met his thrust for thrust. She must be able to feel his cock rigid and ready between them.

Not that he was going to tup Miss Conley.

That should have been enough to snap him out of his lust. Instead, it caused an inferno to explode inside him. Good God, he'd like to tup Miss Conley. Right the hell now.

He took two steps forward, forcing her backward against the wall. Then he lifted her up against the stones and hiked her skirts so he could press his length against her silken drawers.

That had to be enough. Never, never, ever was he going to thrust himself into her hot, tight depths. She was a virgin, and he couldn't damage her. But tonight he could pretend, just for a moment, that the woman who kissed him like he was the man she'd been dreaming about... was his.

Their soft moans mingled as his cock grew harder. He drove his tongue deeper into her mouth and she sucked on it, sending shockwaves through him. Stopping was becoming more and more impossible, never mind everything he'd told himself about Rowland being a cad for attempting to have her, exactly in this way, exactly in this spot.

"We can't," he said breathlessly, then kissed her again. "We can't go further."

Her hands tangled into his carefully windswept hair. He never went anywhere without at least twenty minutes of attention from his valet. Once she ruined his hair, there was no returning to the salon. But if he had no intention of going back inside, why preserve any part of his attire?

Suddenly, he needed to know if Georgiana was hot and wet for him. He tore off his glove with his teeth, then slipped his hand beneath her gown, pausing before covering her heat with his palm. The momentary delay allowed her to stop him, if needed.

She didn't.

Instead, she moaned into his mouth as his hand cupped the thin layer of silk covering her curls. God, yes, she was hot—and wet. The silk slipped against his thumb as he instinctively searched for her sensitive pearl, his first finger simultaneously hooking into the fabric and pulling away so he could delve into her as he'd just vowed to himself not to do.

"We shouldn't," he said again, even as her slippery folds gave way. His finger eased inside her slowly, so much slower than he wanted to go. She cried out in pleasure and he felt a response so primitive, he almost came with it.

They were going to be caught. Yet he couldn't stop himself from kissing her. She answered him with the same desperation, as if by unspoken understanding, they both knew this couldn't last.

Suddenly, Millie's voice sliced through his lust-filled haze like a shard of glass. "Yes, do fetch another sherry for me, Abigail. I need a bit of air. It's far too stuffy in here." From the sound of it, she was hovering just inside the open balcony door.

Stephan dropped Georgiana like a hot coal. His heart, already pounding with passion, raced at the reality of being caught *en dishabille* with her. Thank God for Millie's interference.

Dazed, Miss Conley blinked at him as he backed away. "What are you doing?"

"I must leave you."

A moment passed before she nodded. "Of course." But the expression on her face belied her brave words.

"Georgiana," he said quietly. "If they discover us, or even begin to talk, I'll have to marry you. Do you want to marry me?"

He didn't breathe. For a terrible moment, he feared they both wore the same longing expression.

But the reasonable part of her caught up fast enough. "I can't marry a penniless earl."

He'd been the one to lay things out. Nonetheless, her rejection stung. "And I can't marry a woman without a dowry," he said, choosing his words. *Could not* and *would not* were very different things. "I fear we're star-crossed."

She nodded, her lips pressed together tightly. "So it would seem."

He watched her for a moment. His arms dangled awkwardly at his sides. There could be no goodbye kiss, not even a brush of his knuckles against her cheek. He must leave her with no hope of an attachment, because what he'd done with her tonight could never, ever be repeated.

He inclined his head, then set his hands on the rail and leapt over it, for there was truly no returning to the salon. The plunge into

darkness felt final.

As he skulked around the side of the house, he reminded himself it was all for the best. He'd proved himself a rogue, he was a rogue, and she deserved better.

Chapter 9

THE MURMUR OF EXCITEMENT humming through the library as Georgiana stepped inside caused panic to leap into her throat. Was she too late? Did they already know she'd been compromised? How had she managed to ruin herself on her first night? With her first kiss?

She could only stare blankly at the room as her ears rang. She resisted the urge to touch her tingling lips.

Now she knew why it was called being ruined. He'd surely ruined her for anyone else.

Her cheeks burned as she looked left and right, her gaze darting from person to person. Guilt must be written all over her face. Her hair must be a fright. It had to be plain as day she'd been *cavorting*.

The buzzing in the room grew louder still. Aunt Millie appeared at her side, seemingly from nowhere, and grasped her wrist. "Compose yourself!" she whispered sharply, then just as abruptly, she released her hand. "They're not talking about you."

Georgiana couldn't help it. Her fingers touched her lips.

Aunt Millie quickly snatched her hand away. "Don't do that. And wipe that dumbfounded expression off your face. You look like a chit who's just had her first kiss. They're not discussing you. All that's happened is Stephan's sister has arrived."

Georgiana came instantly alert. She was bursting with curiosity to see Lady Cassandra, after everything Lord de Winter had said. "Where is she?"

"How can you not see her? She's an Original!"

An Original? Georgiana's mouth fell open as she found the earl's sister at the side of the room.

She was positively unparalleled. Almost shocking enough to make Georgiana forget Lord de Winter and their earth-shattering indiscretion.

"It's said she's never seen without her tricorn," Aunt Millie explained, taking Georgiana's arm so they could speak more privately. "No one can remember the last time she wore a skirt. Before France, I vow. Stephan says she disappeared for almost a decade after they had a falling out. Stop gawping, child. She's an eccentric, not a wild

animal.”

But she did look a bit untamed. Lady Cassandra’s brown-black hair was tied in a loose braid at the nape of her neck. It fell almost to her waist. A navy tricorne hat rode low on her brow. Somehow, the effect magnified her piercing blue eyes, set above sharp, slashing cheekbones and a fine, straight, patrician nose.

Picturing her in a ball gown defied Georgiana’s imagination.

Instead, the earl’s sister seemed to have been poured directly into a double-breasted, military-inspired coat perfectly tailored to her feminine curves. Tan-colored breeches molded to her thighs, and form-fitting black Hessian boots hugged her calves. Despite the oddness of her attire, she seemed completely confident in her appearance. She stood front and center of a small group of men, legs braced as if she were balancing on a deck at sea.

“She’s marvelous!” Abigail breathed, popping up on Georgiana’s other side. “Why have we not been introduced?”

“You would think that, wouldn’t you?” Aunt Millie said, giving Abigail a once-over. “You’re something of an odd duck yourself.”

Before Georgiana could worry too much about Lady Cassandra’s potential influence on her impetuous sister, Aunt Millie continued, “We haven’t been formally introduced because she doesn’t approve of us. Stephan has been feuding with her about our presence since we arrived.”

“She doesn’t approve of us?” Abigail continued to gape at Lady Cassandra, who touched the brim of her hat before moving on to another group. Her long stride cut across the room as effortlessly as the earl’s, and yet, she could never be mistaken for a man.

Georgiana watched her hips sway subtly. A tantalizing bit of cleavage peeked above the lapels of her coat. No, she didn’t want to be mistaken for a man. She was simply... herself. Georgiana couldn’t fathom the level of confidence it must require to strut about in one’s own little world.

“Their squabble has no bearing on us, and so we shan’t obsess over it,” Aunt Millie said.

“I shall,” Abigail vowed under her breath. “I shall think about this day and night.”

For all Lord de Winter’s warnings, Georgiana hadn’t considered his sister might pose a poor influence on Abigail. Stupidly, she’d still been expecting a proper lady, if a mean-tempered one.

“Let Lady Cassandra be,” Georgiana said sharply. “If she doesn’t wish to meet us, we shall respect her wishes.” It was probably for the best that they hadn’t been received.

Abigail crossed her arms beneath her breasts. “She doesn’t wish to meet you. Quite possibly, she’s up in arms over Aunt Millie. I’m

certain she has no thoughts one way or the other about me. Yet.”

That did nothing to reassure Georgiana. “Let her be, Abigail!”

“I’m not making that promise,” Abigail said, infuriating Georgiana. “Oh, hmm... I find myself in need of the retiring room.”

Georgiana grabbed her sister’s arm to prevent her from dancing off into certain mischief. “Don’t!” she hissed.

Abigail gave her a beatific look.

“Then I’m coming with you,” Georgiana whispered. “You’re clearly up to something.”

Abigail was the picture of innocence. “I’ve split my hem.”

But Georgiana knew all too well—from experience!—how easily one could fall into trouble without proper supervision.

She dug her nails into her sister’s sleeve. “Then you won’t mind my joining you.”

Abigail shrugged out of her hold. Georgiana released her before they made a scene. Abigail shot off like a prized greyhound.

Only then did Georgiana realize Lady Cassandra was no longer in the library. She followed Abigail out into the hallway. By the time she’d decided whether to turn left or right, her sister was halfway up the staircase, headed for the next landing.

Abigail shrieked.

“Oh, dear me!” Georgiana cried, terrified as she watched her sister tumble down the stairs. She gathered up her skirts and rushed to reach her sister’s side. Concern for Abigail’s welfare overshadowed everything else.

She wasn’t the only person who sprang into action. Two men bolted toward the prone young woman muttering curses as she attempted to push herself up. And Lady Cassandra appeared, swooping in like a dark angel. In her breeches, it was nothing at all for her to drop to her knees beside Abigail.

“You, there, on my count,” Lady Cassandra said, barking orders at one of the men. “Lift the lady. One, two, three. Now set her on the bottom step. Very good. How do you feel, Miss—?”

“Abigail. Abigail Conley, of Gloucester.”

“I ought to have guessed. Miss Abigail, how is your head? Did you twist your leg? I’m certain someone has already sent for the doctor.” Lady Cassandra gave a pointed look at the assembling gawkers, until one of them blinked and uttered assurances that yes, yes, of course they’d send a runner.

She turned back to Abigail. “I doubt anything is broken. That was quite the tumble, nonetheless. Can you wiggle your toes, just to be sure?”

Abigail looked uncertain, but then she nodded. Her green eyes were wide with wonder.

Wonder.

Worship.

“Oh, dear me,” Georgiana whispered again.

Someone brushed against her elbow. Georgiana turned to see her aunt.

“Perhaps not perfectly intentional,” Aunt Millie murmured, regarding Abigail with amusement. “But it seems to have done the trick.”

Chapter 10

HE COULDN'T GET HER out of his head, and he couldn't fathom why.

He'd known plenty of women in his time. Some were beautiful. Some of them—like Millie—were interesting. Some of them caused him to shake his head at their airs. But he'd always viewed his lovers through a distant lens, like actors on a stage. Entertaining, but not truly real, and certainly not his.

He'd never admit it aloud, but on the subject of women, he could best be described as ambivalent. He didn't become entranced with every lovely thing in a skirt, like some men he knew. Nor did he loathe females or blame them for his foibles. He didn't chase them. He'd never needed to, nor had he ever wanted a particular woman enough to trouble himself.

He'd simply assumed that when he found his future wife, he'd know. It wouldn't hit him like a ton of bricks, or anything so clichéd. It would simply... happen. They'd fall in love. Marry. Children would be born. His hair would gray. Hers would, too. They'd travel a bit.

The entire time he'd been wandering around waiting, it had never occurred to him that when he finally found the woman who struck his fancy, she'd be entirely the wrong sort.

What did he do now?

Stephan stared blankly at the paper in front of him. Another creditor he couldn't pay. It was damned depressing, really.

Why couldn't Georgiana be rich?

He sighed heavily. How was he to reconcile the secure, comfortable, frankly dull future he desired, with a woman who had no dowry?

He could marry Millie. Maybe. If she'd have him.

Egad. He had to do *something*. His sister would never forgive him if he didn't repay his IOU. He had to make a decision before she gave up on him entirely. What was the point of having a family, if Cass wasn't part of it?

He crumpled the bill and tossed it on a pile of other crumpled bills. His faith in his taverns wasn't misplaced. They'd prove themselves.

How long would it take? Years? Decades?

He sighed again. He couldn't wait that long. His sister *wouldn't* wait that long.

The door burst open. Cassandra never knocked before entering. Inwardly, he girded himself for another lecture. He'd done this to himself. To them.

"I'm taking the girl back to Gloucester," Cassandra announced, as she fell into the chair across from him. Breeches, of course. Her white shirtsleeves billowed from the confines of a leather vest as she rested her elbows on her knees and leaned forward.

"What girl?" he asked, relieved she hadn't come to demand her cheque, after all. He didn't want to tell her he still hadn't made a decision.

Cassandra's bright gaze pierced the dimness of the library. "We can't afford to keep her when she's clearly unable to look for a husband. She'll heal, but not soon enough."

"Who are you talking about?" He was instantly concerned for Georgiana.

His sister shook her head, seemingly disgusted by his inability to know everything under his roof. "The chit, Abigail. She twisted her ankle at the salon last night. I've spoken to the aunt already. We depart later this afternoon."

He tried to sound indifferent. "And the older sister?"

Cassandra shot him an exasperated look. "Unharm'd."

He expelled his breath. "Good."

"De Winter," Cassandra said, her tone a warning. "We need money. Double or triple what the aunt has in her coffers. And we need it now."

"I know," he replied testily, shifting his pen from one side of his ledger to the other. He hadn't even told her of his notion to marry Millie. How had she guessed?

"I want to believe you," she said earnestly, causing him to look up.

Their gazes locked. She broke away first. A heavy sigh settled her chest. "It's not a simple thing, marriage. Trust me, I'm well aware. But you're a man. Society gives you every freedom to fill your bed. Take any wife, and find your pleasure elsewhere."

He didn't speak. How could he complain about a loveless marriage, when she had no chance of a happy marriage at all?

"That Millie woman you like won't cover you," she said in a low, bitter voice. "Find a wealthier conquest. Anyone. Please. For me."

His gaze fell to his desk. She made it sound so easy. Marry a lady with a deep purse. Restore the fortune he'd gambled away. To hell with friendship. He didn't even need to like her.

His happiness, or his sister's? How long would it take to make both

possible?

Cass set her hands on the edge of his desk. "I want to return to France. You wouldn't understand why. But I can't leave without money. Don't you want me gone?"

"That is absolutely the opposite of what I want. Where did you get that idea?"

She pressed her lips together. "It doesn't matter."

He tried to make sense of her. "I want you to be comfortable. I've done everything I know to do—"

"Except the one thing only you *can* do!" She stabbed her finger onto the table. "One week, two at most. I want my money when I return from Gloucester. Else I might not return at all."

"W-what?" he gasped out. "You can't leave permanently."

"Why shouldn't I? You don't know how to love me, Stephan. All you offer is guilt and shame and more excuses. I need to go home."

"A week isn't nearly enough time!" he protested. "And I do love you. Everything I've done is for you."

She sliced her hand through the air. "You've had months. Years. What do you have to show for it? A pint of ale and a few coins. Now you bring home not one but two unsuitable women. Distractions, both. Why should I wait while you play games?"

Guilt tore through him. That kiss with Georgiana *had* been a distraction. A huge one. Cassandra was right about that, though she was wrong about a great many other things.

"Where would you go?" he asked at last. She was his older sister. He'd adored her since he was in leading strings. If he could do it all again, he'd never gamble her dowry in an adolescent fit. But he couldn't change the past, and he couldn't marry someone he didn't care about. He just couldn't make himself do it.

"If I told you, there wouldn't be much point to cutting ties with you, would there?"

Her threat was a punch to the gut. She knew how to wound him. Perhaps because she, too, feared being alone in this world.

He couldn't lose his sister. She was the only family he had. "I'll find your money," he said quietly, sidestepping any promise to marry. "Give me a chance."

"I expect you will," she said, rising to leave. "Please don't kill anyone to get it."

Chapter 11

GEORGIANA SUCCESSFULLY AVOIDED Lord de Winter for three days following *The Incident*.

She couldn't take all the credit. He'd closeted himself in his office since the morning after his sister had stolen Abigail away.

She grimaced and smoothed the pale pillowcase on Abigail's abandoned bed. Aunt Millie had forbidden Georgiana from taking her sister home. Georgiana feared the earl's sister's influence on Abigail would be impossible to undo after so many days alone. But that wasn't the only reason she resented being held in London.

As irritated as she'd been to have her younger sister invited along, Abigail had provided a distraction of sorts. Without her constant prattling, the London house seemed oppressively silent. Ripe conditions for one's thoughts to spin out of control.

Georgiana recognized the irony of it. All her life, she'd longed for quiet. Now she had it, and it terrified her.

A whisper of sound in the corridor caught her attention. Her heart skipped a beat. Was he outside her door?

She steeled herself. *Don't look. Don't give him the satisfaction!*

The footfalls were too light to belong to a man. She shook her head at her silliness. It wasn't as though she wanted him to speak to her. She could do with never seeing him again!

By mid-afternoon, however, her convictions had flipped entirely. That scoundrel! Did he think he could kiss her and then sweep her under the rug? Of all the...! She was a guest in his house, not some lightskirt in a dark alley. How dare he pretend nothing had happened between them?

After another awkward meal taken with her aunt in the rose-paneled dining room, she was in a fine fit. The moment Aunt Millie withdrew a cheroot and leaned back to light it, Georgiana excused herself. So he thought he could avoid her and make it all go away?

Light spilled from his library door. A male voice she didn't recognize floated into the corridor, causing her to stop short of announcing her presence. Lord de Winter could receive guests without her consent. Instinct told her this was more than a friendly visit.

Perhaps all her years of being the older one, the responsible one, had eroded any shame she might have felt for eavesdropping. As the eldest, it had always fallen to her to ensure no decisions were made that would hurt the family. And with Lord de Winter having inserted himself into her world, wasn't this more of the same?

The stranger spoke again. "If you're hellbent on selling, do it. But you asked for my counsel. I say hold them. Find another way to finance yourself."

"That's just it, Bart." Lord de Winter's earnestness bordered on desperation. "I've turned my mind inside out. I can't think of any other solution."

"It's not a proper fix, though, is it? The alehouses aren't worth twenty thousand pounds together. You'll throw away all your hard work and your future earnings, but you'll still be short."

"Very well. You tell me, then. What am I to do? She's going to cut me out." His voice broke on the last.

Georgiana couldn't have left now if she'd wanted, which she very much didn't.

Bart sighed. The sound of a chair scraping backward was followed by a thump, then crackling, as if someone had risen and thrown more wood on the fire. "Tell me again what Mrs. Rebmann said."

Georgiana's heart stopped. She strained to hear every word.

"She has two thousand a year. Half derives from investments. The other is the sum of multiple annuities settled on her."

"So she has one thousand a year," Bart corrected. "Annuities are usually set to expire upon marriage."

Georgiana knew only one thing about annuities: they were granted by men as part of a contract for a liaison. Her suspicions about Aunt Millie's secondary occupation were confirmed, as was her theory about Lord de Winter wanting to marry her aunt.

She felt ill.

De Winter might have nodded; she couldn't see inside the room. "She has another five thousand saved, aside from her accounts on the Exchange, but she's made it clear she's not a lending institution."

"She demands marriage."

Silence again. Perhaps another nod.

Georgiana clasped her hand to her breast. Oh, goodness. Why had she *kissed* him? Now she hurt so much worse.

"Five thousand's not enough," Bart said, much to Georgiana's relief. "Why not catch a bigger fish?"

Clothing rustled as one of the men shifted positions. Georgiana waited on pins and needles for de Winter to answer.

"I just can't bring myself to do it," he said at long last. "I've tried. It's what my sister wants. But my parents... Well, they were so

damned miserable. I like Millie well enough. Better the devil I know.”

“But you don’t love her,” Bart replied.

Georgiana clamped a hand over her mouth. The question shouldn’t have elicited a squeak from her, but she would simply die if he said yes, after he’d told her he didn’t.

“No, no, nothing like that,” de Winter said, causing Georgiana to almost collapse with relief. He continued, “She’s a friend, which will have to be good enough. I just want to be done with this whole unsettling business of owing my sister a fortune.”

“Not badly enough to find someone wealthier,” Bart pointed out.

“I just feel like there must be a way out of this without marrying an heiress selected from a hat. There has to be.”

A long moment passed without comment.

“So fifteen thousand, then,” Bart said. Whoever he was, his feathers didn’t ruffle easily. “We need a solution for fifteen thousand, after Mrs. Rebmann accepts you.”

Georgiana admired his poise. Except then she realized what he’d said. Lord de Winter was going to *marry* Aunt Millie!

Her heart sank through the floor.

“You have the alehouses,” Bart said, unaware she was about to sob uncontrollably at the thought of her aunt and the earl, together. Of losing any chance she’d had of inheriting Aunt Millie’s estate. Of being alone, and destitute, for rest of her life, never knowing what it would have been like if she and Lord de Winter had been allowed to see their torrid kiss through to the end.

“Are they turning any profit at all?” Bart asked.

Lord de Winter must have shaken his head.

“Are they costing you?”

“Breaking even, mostly.”

Bart didn’t immediately reply. Georgiana continued to wheeze in the corridor, truly faint with emotion.

Bart finally broke the silence. “Have you spoken to Montborne?”

“Why would I have done?” Lord de Winter said with a bark of laughter. “He’s in it worse than I am.”

“Not at all,” Bart countered. “We’re on the other side now. Perhaps he’d be willing to loan you the money.”

“A loan? From Roman?” Lord de Winter sounded shocked. “That would be something, wouldn’t it?”

Bart didn’t comment aloud, so Georgiana had no way to know if he was annoyed by de Winter’s disbelief. “I don’t want to speak for my older brother, and I certainly don’t want to infuriate Tony, but there’s money in the coffers. Mayhap something can be worked out between you two.”

Lord de Winter didn’t immediately reply. “He doesn’t think very

highly of me,” he finally said, seeming to have accepted Bart was right about Lord Montborne’s improved situation. “Still sore over that business with Lord Dare.”

“So am I,” Bart said. “But business is business. I’m not suggesting a handout. You have alehouses. He has a canal. If these two endeavors were aligned, it could be profitable for everyone.”

Georgiana sensed Lord de Winter’s mood shift. Without her own knowledge of the canal or the alehouses, she couldn’t fully understand what Bart was proposing. But she had the gist. Travelers on the canal—ferryman, sailors, and passengers—could find a hot meal and a cold tankard at one of Lord de Winter’s alehouses. Perhaps Bart’s brother would be interested in making an investment.

All of a sudden, the situation came into focus. Firstly, that Lord de Winter wasn’t just a frequent guest at the inns and posting houses where they’d stopped for respite. It seemed he owned everything, from the taverns where she’d taken her meals, to the beds she’d slept in, to the ales she’d drank.

She also knew who was in the room. Lord Bartholomew Alexander, a barrister in His Majesty’s Court, was one of Lord Montborne’s numerous younger brothers. She’d know of Lord Montborne even if she didn’t have a personal connection to him, for the marquis was mentioned in almost every one of her aged *Ladies’ Companions*.

He’d been a rake, at the time. Now he was distantly related to her by marriage. Her brother Gavin had eloped with Lord Montborne’s wife’s younger sister. An association that hadn’t benefited Georgiana, until tonight.

She must be able to make use of this revelation. Lord de Winter meant to usurp her inheritance. She was to be left with even less than she’d begun with, for now her reputation was tarnished beyond recovery by her association with Aunt Millie.

Lord de Winter owed her. Perhaps Lord Montborne could ensure she was compensated.

She tried to find a way to tie the loose ends together. What if she became a proprietress of one of the alehouses? It would give her a place of her own, in a sense. Certainly, it would be preferable to returning to her brother’s house.

She couldn’t possibly continue as her aunt’s companion after the wedding.

The more she thought about it, the more sense it made. Was it possible to put the idea in Lord de Winter’s head without admitting she’d been spying on him? Or was it safer to approach Lord Montborne, given their loose familial ties?

She’d never met the man. Mayhap she’d fare better speaking directly with Lord de Winter.

The two men began closing pleasantries. Georgiana quietly backed away from the door. She'd sleep on it, that was what she'd do. By morning, she'd know precisely how to convince Lord de Winter to let her help.

Chapter 12

THE BEAU MONDE was an exclusive club by its very definition. The fast set who prowled the wee hours, after the more reputable members of the *ton* had retired to their beds, further defined the uppermost echelon of Society. And then there were the titled nobility, those few gentlemen whose family names were as old as Britain herself.

Stephan had known Roman Alexander, Lord Montborne, since they'd been beanpoles with squeaking voices. They'd traveled in the same circles for most of their lives. He wouldn't describe their association as friendship. Their relationship was more like that of cousins: invited to the same events, expected to get on together, but not required to be in close confidence, or even to particularly like one another.

He dressed carefully for his meeting with the marquis. Marriage had settled Montborne, and he'd ceased being a fixture at every party. Some things had not changed, however. For one, he'd not abandoned his reputation as the most fashionable man in London.

Stephan had enough marks against him in Montborne's book without adding "disheveled" to the list. He even had his valet press a dark blue waistcoat, rather than his usual brown, knowing Montborne disapproved of his drab-colored wardrobe.

Trouble was, no amount of plumage could change the fact Montborne blamed him for escorting the youngest Alexander brother—Stephan's old friend, Lord Darius—back to the gaming hells, back when the family had been struggling with taming Lord Dare's compulsion to wager everything and anything worth value.

An error in judgment, that. A mistake that had ultimately cost him Dare's friendship, for Dare had severed every reminder of his old life when he'd finally turned clean.

Being cut out of people's lives was in danger of becoming a pattern for Stephan.

He pushed the despondent thought away. Montborne had agreed to meet with him. This was his chance to repair his relationship with the Alexander family, and save his relationship with his sister at the same time.

With his hair perfectly coiffed and his cravat inflated to ridiculous proportions, Stephan left his room—and promptly collided with Georgiana just outside his door.

“Oomph!” She grabbed the lapels of his starched coat to steady herself.

“Georgiana!” He didn’t mean for her given name to escape his lips, but he didn’t correct himself. The damage was already done. He saw it in her widened eyes and heard it in the tiny gasp she quickly smothered.

She pushed herself away as if he were fire.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, when it seemed she’d forgotten how to speak. *Not that you aren’t welcome at my door.*

He couldn’t think like that, not anymore, now that he’d resolved to propose marriage to Millie. They may not be in love but he respected her too much to stray, even if they hadn’t yet said their vows.

Even if he wasn’t certain she’d accept him.

Georgiana visibly composed herself. She folded her hands in front of her skirt. “Improper, I know, but I feared missing you.” Her cheeks lit a becoming pink. “Not that I’ve *missed* you—”

“Nor I, you,” he said gallantly.

A scowl of annoyance crossed her face, causing him to almost laugh.

“I have a proposition,” she began again, and he did laugh.

She batted her hand in the air. “Do be serious for once. I wish to discuss a business opportunity.”

He couldn’t have been more surprised. He came to attention. “Go on.”

She glanced at her feet before raising her gaze to meet his. “I’ve been thinking about my prospects, such as they are.”

Fleetinglly, she looked away again. His heart thudded against his chest, as though she were about to add, *with you.*

But she didn’t.

“I don’t wish to be a burden to anyone. Nor can I see a future for myself here.”

She didn’t define “here.” It could have meant anything. London, a place in the fast set, his house. Yet he was certain she meant *anywhere you are.*

It ached, even if it shouldn’t.

“I see,” he said, for he had nothing else to say. Yet another person was pushing him away. “How can I be of service?”

Her bosom rose and fell on a breath. “You own several posting houses, I believe. Taverns.”

“Alehouses,” he supplied. She had his full attention now.

“Might there be a place for me at one of them?” The question

tumbled out of her. As though, if she asked it fast enough, he couldn't deny her.

He blinked, trying to understand. "You don't wish to reside here while you're in London?"

She shook her head vigorously. "I seek employment, not lodging. I believe I'd make a fine proprietress. I've run a large household most of my life. I know a thing or two about making ale. It's perfect, really, if you think about it. It's been my dream to have a place of my own."

Her eyes sparkled as she said the last. She looked so hopeful, he hated to be the one to tell her no.

"It does seem fitting," he allowed, "but I'm afraid I already have proprietors."

Color returned to her cheeks. "Yes, of course, my lord. But perhaps you'd consider opening a new alehouse. One we might design together."

"There's no money for that," he began, before cutting himself short. He was about to propose almost the very thing to Montborne, was he not? "I haven't the funding for such an endeavor yet," he corrected. "Although it's something I've recently considered. I'm late for a business meeting on the very subject, actually. When I return—"

"Oh, excellent! I'll join you," she interjected quickly.

"There's really no need—"

"Nonsense, it's no trouble." She took his arm as if he'd offered it. Her warmth burned through his coat sleeve. "I'd much rather be involved from the ground up."

He narrowed his eyes at the top of her head. So much for her cautious probing; he could almost swear she'd known what he was about.

Nevertheless, he saw no reason to keep her away. While he hadn't fully wrapped his mind around her proposal, he did know one thing: Lord Montborne was a sight more likely to sympathize with him if he brought along a damsel in distress.

Stephan would accept any help he could get.

Chapter 13

THE BUTTERFLIES IN GEORGIANA'S BELLY didn't settle until they were standing in the foyer of Lord Montborne's Mayfair home. The entryway smelled thickly of paint and glue, as though the wallpaper had recently been redone.

She didn't have time to admire the freshly polished floor or plush carpet peeping from the nearest drawing room. They were whisked up a grand staircase to yet another immense library.

The butler announced their arrival. "Lord de Winter and Miss Conley to see you, my lord."

The marquis rose from behind an enormous desk covered in stacks of papers. Georgiana had never seen the like of him. Nor did the accounts in her *Ladies' Companion* do him justice. He towered above every man she knew. Golden ringlets framed his angelically handsome face. And his clothing! His snug-fit, velvet-lined superfine coat alone likely cost the same as her brother's new forge.

He came around the desk with long-legged grace. Piercing blue eyes took her measure before turning to Lord de Winter, though she didn't have the feeling she'd been dismissed.

He intended to skewer de Winter. Her presence wasn't going to stop him.

"Mr. Benjamin, summon Lord Bart," he said, without tearing his attention from Lord de Winter.

"Yes, my lord," the butler replied. The doors closed behind Georgiana.

The marquis began without preamble. "A handout, de Winter? Are you raving mad?"

Stephan stiffened beside her. Georgiana bit her tongue before she defended the earl out of hand. She didn't know what old wound festered between them, and could do no good by interjecting early.

"Not a handout, a loan." Stephan gestured to the sitting area to his left. "May I?"

"Please, make yourself comfortable," Lord Montborne drawled. "Mr. Benjamin will no doubt send tea. Shall I ring for anything else?"

Georgiana glanced at Stephan.

His jaw muscle twitched. "If you're angry with me, say so."

"I'm angry. Your turn." The marquis' blue eyes blazed in challenge. He folded his arms across his chest.

Stephan raised his hands. "I'm sorry. I meant Dare no harm."

Lord Montborne's handsome scowl deepened. "Keep going."

Stephan sighed. He shook his head. "I should have realized he was sinking. It became obvious in the end. I ought to have seen it sooner."

"And?"

"I was an idiot."

"Yes. You were."

The two men stared at each other. Lord Montborne's icy glare didn't thaw.

Stephan turned away first. He touched his hand to his head, then pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm sorry, Roman. What more can I say? As soon as I perceived he was drowning, I tried to help him. For God's sakes, I brought him home!"

"Drunk as a fish and broke as a pauper! How irresponsible could you be?" The marquis began to pace the narrow room, his angry strides long and quick. He waved his hands in the air dramatically as he lectured Stephan. "After all the effort we'd put into keeping him sober, all our begging him to stay away from the gaming tables, you took him right back! How could you not have known? What sort of dim-witted, selfish fool doesn't see that his best friend is going tits up?"

Stephan raised his hands again, imploring the marquis to accept his answer. "I meant him no harm, I swear."

Montborne took a step closer, so Georgianna could smell his lemon-scented soap. "It's because you're precisely the same sort of wastrel good-for-nothing gambler he was. You must be out of your mind if you believe I'd give you the coins from my couch cushions, let alone fifteen thousand quid."

"Twenty thousand," Stephan corrected, causing Georgiana to blink with surprise. Wasn't he planning to take five thousand from Aunt Millie?

"I don't care if it's ten shillings. I'm not giving you a cent."

Stephan's visage grew cold. Red marks blazed where Lord Montborne had drawn blood, but the rest of his face became unreadable. "I haven't lost more than I can afford in eight years. You, of all people, ought to understand. A man can change." He balled his hand into a fist. "I'm sorry. I was too selfish to notice how Lord Dare suffered, until it was too late. But I'm no degenerate. I care what people think of me. And I'm *this close* to putting all my misdeeds behind me. I just need a little cover."

"Twenty thousand pounds is no small request!" Montborne strode

to the sitting area and fell into a chair. His long arms rested on the armrests. "Damn you for making such a pretty plea."

Georgiana's brows rose. Was it possible the marquis was coming around?

He spared her his first glance since their initial introduction. "I infer you're meant to be a windbreak between us, Miss Conley. It's not working. I'm too angry to spare your sensibilities a good battering."

She took that as an opening to speak. "I've seen worse rows, my lord. I have four younger sisters."

He laughed, causing her breath to catch in her throat. She wasn't immune to handsome men, apparently. First Lord de Winter, now the marquis. Her head could be turned far more easily than she'd ever believed.

"The loan isn't for Lord de Winter," she said, taking a tentative step forward. "I wish to open one of Lord de Winter's alehouses along your canal. As a woman, I have no recourse but to rely on my lord's generous offer to help me appeal to you."

"Posh. He owes Lady Cassandra through the roof. Bart's told me everything."

She glanced at Stefan, but his stoic composure gave nothing away.

"Two things can be true at once," she pressed. "Lord de Winter must repay his sister, and I need a living." She sat primly in the chair across from the marquis. "Your wife must have relayed her sister's situation to you. Delilah, Gavin, and our entire brood have been living cheek-by-jowl above my brother's ironworks for years. Now there are children, too. I need a place of my own. Think of it as a loan between family, rather than propping up Lord de Winter."

"They say lending money to family is the worst option," Lord Montborne replied, dashing her hopes to dust. He looked her up and down again, taking her measure a second time—or perhaps truly seeing her for the first time. "But family is also the only thing that matters. I suppose if we ignore this rotter over here, I could make an exception."

She nearly sank with relief. Could it be this easy? She'd have her tavern, and Lord de Winter wouldn't have to marry Aunt Millie—

She didn't know which thought made her more elated.

"I don't have twenty thousand, though," he amended, crashing into her silent celebration. "Ten, at best."

"It isn't enough!" Lord de Winter objected.

Georgiana shot him a deadly look. He had no business complaining, when he'd almost cost them the loan.

"It's all I have," Lord Montborne replied with a shrug. "You may take it or leave it. To be sure, even had I fifteen quid to spare, I fail to foresee a return on such an enormous investment. It's only an

alehouse. Ten is all I'll offer."

"We accept," Georgiana said quickly. "Thank you, my lord. You can't imagine what this means to me."

"I do know what it feels like to be out of place in your own home," he said cryptically. "But there is one more string I must attach. Lord Bart shall represent me. I want full partnership."

Her mouth opened in outrage before she could fashion her expression into acceptance. Of course he wanted a say in their venture. Ten thousand pounds was a fortune.

"I understand, my lord," she murmured.

Stephan came to stand at her back. "As long as you've no ulterior motives, Montborne. I'm not so certain you're as benevolent as you seem."

"Moi?" Lord Montborne feigned innocence. "I can't think at all what you mean."

Chapter 14

MR. BENJAMIN DID SEND TEA. It arrived long before Lord Bart.

Georgiana doled out the last two teacakes as he entered. If she hadn't already made a fool of herself by kissing Lord de Winter, and gaped in wonder at Lord Montborne's rakish splendor, she might have acted the very ninny at the sight of Lord Bart Alexander. Fortunately, she was beginning to suspect there were no ugly men in London. Lord Bart's beautifully broad shoulders and deep, dark eyes didn't even cause her hands to shake.

She calmly set the serving tongs back onto the tray and nodded regally as he turned a leg for her. While she was hardly the most experienced judge of a man's bow, she observed stiffness in Lord Bart. His was a more formal turn, quite proper, suitable for his position as a barrister. This was not a man who played games.

"Miss Conley." He offered her a perfectly adequate smile, showing precisely the right amount of straight, white teeth. He bent at the waist for exactly the minimum time required. His eyes met hers in a polite acknowledgement, just long enough to satisfy expectations. "A pleasure."

Despite the rote greeting, she felt a quiver in her belly. *Unassuming* and *handsome* were two of her favorite qualities in a man, apparently.

Stephan cleared his throat.

"You told Roman without me," he accused Lord Bart.

Lord Bart pivoted toward him. His eyes took on a twinkle. "You're welcome."

Roman, resting languidly in his armchair, steepled his fingers. "You didn't want to hear my initial reaction, to be sure. Now. We're all together, at last. Shall we begin our plotting? Money doesn't magically appear just by wishing hard enough, I've learned."

They spent the rest of the day working through details. Stephan was most concerned with the timing of payments. Lord Montborne wished to influence the aesthetic. Lord Bart poured over land maps, searching for the ideal location along the canal.

Georgiana had an opinion on it all.

"Oh, I do think we should set aside space for private dining," she

said, after Lord Bart called the idea an unnecessary waste.

"Most of your patrons will be single men," he reasoned. "We could make do with counters and stools."

"They will be if you have your way," she argued. "If we don't provide comfort and privacy for genteel travelers, we won't have any. No respectable family wants to take their meal rubbing elbows with dock workers."

She won that round.

When Stephan decided revenues ought to be delivered to London weekly, Georgiana demurred. "The cost to hire a driver four times as often as we absolutely must is money we cannot afford, my lord."

And when Lord Montborne wanted to paint the walls a bright, clean white, she shook her head. "We're offering respite to tired travelers. They want a reminder of home, not the inside of a church."

By the end of the day, her head spun with decisions yet to be made. Her empty belly had long ago forgotten about the three tiny teacakes she'd eaten at the start.

"Stay for dinner," Lord Montborne insisted. "We shan't speak a word about ale."

Georgiana lamented the wrinkles in her dress. It wasn't the done thing in a great house like this to go straight in to dinner.

Stephan caught her eye. Unspoken understanding passed between them. "Thank you, but we must return. We didn't intend to stay the entire afternoon. I, for one, would like to kick off these infernal boots."

After making plans for a second meeting later in the week, Stephan and Georgiana stepped onto the pebbled walk in front of Lord Montborne's home. The street bustled as everyone in London seemed to be ending their day at once. Maids carrying wrapped parcels vied with porters and street sweepers. Wagons, carriages, and smart little phaetons jostled for position.

Georgiana had never seen such commotion. She wasn't sure how she felt about it.

"Shall I hail a hack?" Stephan asked. He'd dismissed the carriage hours earlier. It was only a short distance to his townhouse, and she'd assured him she didn't mind the exercise. Nevertheless, she hadn't expected to need to strong-arm her way through a crowd.

"I'll manage," she vowed, and took the arm he offered. It felt natural to fall into step beside him. As though they'd strolled this way a thousand times, and she belonged here, sheltered by his height.

An utterly ridiculous and indefensible thought.

"Do you miss wandering the countryside?" he asked, after a time. The polite question, no more personal than discussing the weather, shouldn't have sent tingles up her spine. Yet the tiny hairs on the back

of her neck stood up.

"I never did such a thing," she replied, too abruptly. "I had a large number of people to manage in tight quarters. I hardly had a moment to think a private thought, let alone traipse about with no direction in mind. That was the sort of diversion my sisters enjoyed."

They turned a corner and suddenly, they were alone. The street seemed darker. As happened in winter, the sun had never fully broken through the clouds. A lingering gray mist bathed the buildings and seeped into the alleys.

She inched closer to Stephan.

"That's the thing about crowds," he mused. "More opportunity for a pickpocket, but less overall fear of being accosted."

"Are we safe?" Her voice squeaked in a most embarrassing way. She couldn't remember a single instance in Gloucester when she'd felt so vulnerable.

"Am I not the dashing hero?" he teased.

She shot him an exasperated look. "I've no doubt your heart's in the right place, my lord. But you're unarmed. A band of marauding thieves would surely win this fight."

"You don't even pretend to have faith in me!" He laughed and shook his head.

A rat scurried across their path. She cried out and clung tighter to his arm as her heart leapt into her throat.

"I'm mollified a bit, I suppose," he said, withdrawing his arm to wrap it around her. He rubbed her shoulder reassuringly.

Then he cleared his throat. "Miss Conley..."

Her mouth went dry. He was practically embracing her in the middle of the street. He'd flirted with her. He'd kissed her. Now he was addressing her in that special tone reserved for awkward conversations.

She didn't want to hear a monologue about why he wasn't free to marry as he wished. She already knew he wasn't.

But... he didn't know she knew.

"You asked Lord Montborne for twenty thousand pounds," she said, seizing control of the subject. "He offered half. Do you have a plan for acquiring the remainder?"

Stephan removed his arm from her shoulder, then returned her hand to his forearm. "Not entirely, no."

She waited for him to say more.

He didn't.

"You're a fortune hunter, sir."

He shrugged. "Not at heart."

"You must make a good match."

"So you keep reminding me."

"Why do you owe your sister such an astronomical amount?"

"If only I didn't," he replied. "I gambled her dowry away."

She turned to him, aghast. "How could you have done?"

"Quickly and easily, I'm afraid." Regret laced his handsome features, tugging at her heartstrings. "I was angry with my mother for leaving me alone. Scared, too. I've been the earl since boyhood, but she'd managed everything. I can barely recall my father, but my mother..." He drew a shaky breath. "She was everything to me. After she died, I fell into a dark place. It's no excuse but it's some sort of explanation."

She thought twice about touching him. In the end, she couldn't resist brushing a stray lock of hair from his brow. "You've paid dearly for it," she surmised.

He nodded, then caught her hand and held it to his cheek. "I hurt no one but my dear sister."

Georgiana's resolve melted away. "Have you apologized?"

"A thousand times. Cass and I were close. We used to spend my school holidays fishing the lake and climbing trees. She taught me to ride. I purchased her first rapier. She cannot know how sorry I am."

Georgiana sympathized with his earnest desire to atone for his sins. He clearly felt horribly about the wrong he'd committed. Nonetheless, she'd be just as furious as Lady Cassandra, had her own brother gambled away her dowry and ruined her chance to make a good match.

Now she understood why she'd overheard Stephan say Lady Cassandra was going to cut him out of her life. She also suspected the earl's sister was drawing a line to encourage him to act, not severing ties with him because she'd stopped loving him.

Georgiana withdrew her hand. She was in too deep with a man who truly *wasn't* free to marry a dowerless spinster. Worse, she agreed with his need to repay his sister and make things right between them. It was all-too easy to see things from Lady Cassandra's position.

But it did give her an idea. She felt silly proposing it, for surely, he'd considered it already. Yet she was desperate to help him find a resolution now that she better understood the problem. "Have you tried asking your sister if she'd accept an annuity?"

Surprise crossed his face. "Rather than a lump sum?"

Hope sparked in her breast. Perhaps he hadn't thought of it.

She nodded, then clarified, "Ten thousand now, the rest in payments. A set of installments would allow you breathing room."

His chest inflated before her eyes, as if he were truly taking his first full inhale in years. "It didn't even occur to me. Miss Conley, you're quite brilliant."

She grinned back at him, delighted by his praise, and buoyed by

the prospect of a simple solution so easily within reach. "You're not offended?"

"How could I be? Besides, the situation today is quite different than yesterday. Payments on twenty thousand would have beggared me. Ten is much more manageable, though even now, it would be a bit of a gamble. But you may be right." He took her hands again. This time, he bent and kissed her knuckles. "I am in your debt."

Georgiana laughed. His enthusiasm was contagious. Mayhap there truly was a path out of this.

Maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't have to marry Aunt Millie.

Maybe he could be free.

She beamed, knowing she must resemble the very greenest girl. "Please, Lord de Winter, don't use the phrase 'in your debt' when you are so close to solvency. We shall have no more IOUs in your name."

He grinned at her. "Why, Miss Conley, I do believe you've made a joke."

Chapter 15

CASSANDRA WOULD RETURN ANY DAY. Stephan didn't allow himself to dwell on what might transpire if she rejected his settlement offer. As long as she hadn't said no, he had hope.

He kept his focus on the new alehouse. Georgiana accompanied him to Lord Montborne's library two more times that week to see Lord Bart. While the three of them had their heads down—Lord Montborne had returned to his own pursuits, as he'd promised to do—the only topic of conversation was the tavern.

They sparred over most of the decisions. Georgiana held nothing back, despite being flanked and outranked by both men. She reminded Stephan of his sister with her plain-speaking ways.

But he didn't think of her as a sister. Or even as the niece of his intended wife. And when he caught Bart watching her admiringly, he felt white hot jealousy and didn't think of Millie at all.

As much as he liked watching her at work, it was the short walks home that Stephan looked forward to sharing with Georgiana. It was just the two of them... no matter how crowded the streets.

They'd just reached his townhouse when a brilliant idea hit him. "We've done everything on paper," he said, turning to her. "How would you like to examine a selection of nearby posting houses and taverns tomorrow? We'll send a message to Bart forthwith to let him know we won't be joining him, after all."

A pretty rose color dusted her cheeks. An outing together sounded scandalous. The carriage ride alone was rife with possibilities. Had she been a young debutante, he wouldn't have suggested it.

But they were business partners. Likely to be family one day. A quick trip about the outskirts of town was entirely justifiable, or so he told himself.

She nodded once. Black lashes brushed her cheeks as she glanced down. "That sounds perfect." Her eyes flew open. "Perfectly acceptable, that is."

His heart skipped a beat. Fire. He was playing a dangerous game with her, no matter how many times he tried to convince himself otherwise.

Trouble was, he'd never been good at restraining himself, or others, from making bad decisions. When Lord Dare had wanted to spend his evenings gambling despite all the trouble he was already in, Stephan had accompanied him without judgment. Stephan's affair with Millie had begun because he'd been more than happy to provide a diversion for his friend, Lord Grantham, when Grantham had been smitten with Georgiana's sister and wanted a way to see her alone. And Stephan had lost Cassandra's inheritance because he'd been unable to pull himself out of a black spiral after their mother's sudden death.

Knowing he was making a mistake with Georgiana ought to be enough to keep him from making a mistake.

Problem was, Georgiana didn't feel like a mistake.

What if marrying Millie was the mistake?

The next day, he met Georgiana in the foyer before they would have normally taken breakfast. Posting houses opened in the wee hours. They closed long after most everyone else had adjourned to bed.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked, as they both donned outerwear.

She pulled on her gloves, the ones with the mended fingertips. "Not worse than any other night, my lord."

He ought to have expected nothing less than brutal honesty. "I had no idea you were uncomfortable. Is there anything I can see done on your behalf?"

She tugged her woolen hat tightly onto her head, then began knotting the brown ribbons beneath her chin. The monstrosity was a damned ugly thing that nonetheless did wonders for shaping her face. Her eyes loomed impossibly large as she glanced up at him. "If you must know, I haven't had a proper sleep in weeks. I've never heard such a cacophony as berates my ears all hours of the night."

The footman opened the door. Stephan offered Georgiana his arm. Today there'd be no stroll for them, as they were headed all the way to the edge of town.

Stephan had lain awake most of the night, himself. The warring in his head between right and wrong had kept him from sleeping. Had he known Georgiana was also awake, and just a few doors down...

"Your room overlooks the street," he said, as he helped her into his carriage. The interior seemed dim and private, despite the fact it was broad daylight, and the whole contraption was paneled in windows.

His mouth suddenly felt as dry as the late-winter air stinging his cheeks.

She smoothed her skirts. "I've no complaints about the room, my lord."

He flashed her a conspiratorial look. "That's not what I'm hearing."

“It’s well-appointed.”

“It’s too noisy,” he said. The carriage rocked as he climbed inside and took the rear-facing seat across from her. His shoulder banged into the sidewall as he tucked in his long legs while trying not to rub against hers. Why hadn’t he picked a bigger conveyance?

She didn’t move her feet. She didn’t so much as twitch. But her breathing did seem rapid. And her pupils were dilated black orbs. Almost like a cornered rabbit’s.

Mayhap now that he was occupying more than half the space, she’d realized *she’d* made a mistake.

They were jolted out of their trance by the swaying of the carriage as the driver climbed onto the box above. Georgiana smoothed her skirts again. Then she turned toward the window. “I suppose you’re used to all the racket.”

He’d almost forgotten what they were talking about. But he couldn’t help noticing the way one of her fingers rubbed rhythmically against her thigh. A nervous tick?

“Mine is tucked away in a corner,” he replied. “I don’t hear a thing in the back of the house.”

“Sounds lovely,” she said, staring fixedly through the windowpane.

His heart nearly pounded out of his chest. “You may use the adjoining room, if you like.” *If you want to be near me.*

She slowly turned her head to look at him as if he’d gone daft. Her brown eyes had widened to saucers.

But.

She didn’t scold him.

And.

She didn’t say no.

He could have sworn his heart was going to choke him to death. He couldn’t breathe. He didn’t speak. He’d said what were surely the most salacious words of his life, and he’d not been roundly rejected.

Well. This outing was looking less and less responsible by the second.

The whole carriage jerked forward as the horses took a step. Suddenly, a man’s voice called for them to stop. Before Stephan could ascertain what was happening, the door popped open and Lord Bart leapt inside.

Stephan gaped at him. He was so flabbergasted, he didn’t make room.

Bart crammed himself in beside Georgiana before she, too, could react.

He looked back and forth between them.

They both stared agog.

“Never fear,” Bart said. “Your missive arrived just in time.”

THEY MADE ROUNDS at five separate taverns over the course of a long day. Never in her life could Georgiana have imagined herself on such an excursion. She, who'd always been so persnickety about adhering to mores, had enjoyed herself immensely as the feminine counterpart of a reveling trio.

They'd begun after breakfast. She hadn't kept up with the men, mug for mug of cold ale, but she'd done an admirable job. Hours later, with twilight upon them, none seemed too steady on their feet as they hauled themselves into the carriage. She sank against the squab, her belly full of stew and brown bread—and ale. So much ale.

Another smile broke across her face. She was *smashed*.

"I enjoyed that immensely," Stephan said, as he squeezed into the extremely narrow space beside her.

Her face, already warm from too much drink, heated as his body sealed against hers from shoulder to knee. She quickly looked away. Her smile was affixed to her face. She couldn't have stopped grinning like a loon, even if she'd tried.

Ever the gentleman, Bart didn't complain that his position had been usurped. He was the most at ease she'd seen him. His hands rested on his knees and a small smile played on his lips. "It's been a difficult set of days. I needed a respite."

They both turned to her. "What about you, Miss Conley?" Stephan asked, as the coach lurched toward home.

She shook her head, still smiling. How did she describe something she ought never to have done, but had enjoyed beyond belief?

She'd never had friends before, she realized. The only other time she'd felt this way was when Stephan had first approached her, at his tavern not far from Aunt Millie's cottage.

Stephan Laurent, Lord de Winter, an *earl*, the most handsome and roguish man she'd ever met, a recovering *wastrel*, was her first and only friend.

Georgiana simply didn't know what to say.

He smiled at her. She felt it all down the side of her body, and in that special place only he'd awakened. She was glad of the many

layers of fabric covering her.

And then she remembered how easily he'd removed them.

Bart cleared his throat at the same time Stephan asked her in a low, rumbling voice, "Did you make a decision about your lodging, Miss Conley?"

He hadn't forgotten he'd offered her the room adjoining his. She closed her eyes the barest second. Then she nodded.

"Was that a yes?"

"Yes," she said, her voice stronger than her nerves.

"Yes, you made a decision, or yes, the answer is yes?" Stephan pressed.

She swallowed. Then she looked at him. "Yes."

Bart shifted his legs, causing them both to adjust in response. Stephan managed to hook one booted foot under her skirts. Georgiana felt herself blush again.

Bart looked between them. Then his gaze bored into Georgiana. "Miss Conley, I wonder if you'd like to drive with me tomorrow?"

She froze.

Stephan stiffened beside her.

How to reply?

She'd never been asked to step out with anyone, let alone the brother of an earl. Lord Bart was polite, somber, accomplished in his area of expertise, and handsome. He was delightfully unattached.

And yet, she saw him as a walking list of desirable traits, not as a potential suitor.

There was still a chance Stephan would find a way out of his need to marry Aunt Millie.

Aunt Millie.

Georgiana fought back a wave of despair. She was in a fine pickle, wasn't she? Tempted to turn down an invitation from the most perfect-on-paper gentleman she'd ever met, in favor of a man with far too many entanglements.

"Yes, thank you," Georgiana replied softly, forcing herself to look out of the window. She wouldn't look at Stephan. Couldn't.

The carriage stopped. No one moved.

Finally, Stephan leaned forward and unlatched the door. "I have to see to the..." he mumbled, and dropped onto the street.

By the time Lord Bart helped Georgiana down, Stephan had disappeared into the house. She tried not to stare after him.

Lord Bart escorted her to the front door. "Until tomorrow, Miss Conley," he said, bowing over her hand.

She nodded and pushed the door. It *snicked* closed behind her.

What a day!

She tossed her gloves onto a plate and shrugged out of her coat. All

the warmth cocooning her for the last few hours had dissipated with Lord de Winter's cool retreat. A hot cup of tea sounded just the thing.

She headed to the kitchens. By the time she reached her bedchamber, an hour had passed.

She stopped dead in the doorway.

All of her things were gone.

Chapter 17

“I’M TO TRUST YOU?” Cassandra’s short bark of laughter told Stephan all he needed to know about her answer.

His stomach sank.

She kicked into the chair across from his. He hadn’t known she’d returned from Gloucester while he’d been out with Georgiana and Bart. He hadn’t expected his sister to find him here, brooding in his bedchamber while he nursed a snifter of brandy.

The shuffle of the servants sorting Georgiana’s personal effects in the room next door filtered through the wall. He tried not to look guilty.

“Ten thousand is a good start,” he said, defensively. “The rest in steady payments.”

Cass availed herself of his half-empty bottle and took a swig. Dust coated her breeches and Hessians. She hadn’t changed clothing since returning from her journey. “I asked you to secure a certainty, not go into business with a lout like Lord Montborne. As far as I see it, you owe both of us ten thousand now. How is that better?”

Any hope she’d come around after her first volley disappeared.

“I just can’t,” he said, imploring her to understand. “I can’t marry someone I don’t love.”

She waved one hand over her shoulder as she took another draught of his brandy. “I can’t marry the person *I* love. Stop being so maudlin about it.”

If only he could. It would make things so much easier if he shared her transactional view.

After a moment, he indicated toward her with his empty glass. “You came back.”

She toasted him with his bottle. “I had too much faith in you, little brother. I suppose I’ll collect my things.”

He didn’t know what else to do. “I want to make this work. Please, stay.”

Cass jabbed the bottle toward the dividing door an arm’s length away. “I’ve had enough experience to know what all that knocking is in there. You’re not trying to please me. You only care about

yourself.”

He drained his snifter and thumped it on the arm of his chair. “You’re right. Bringing her closer isn’t helping anything.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

He clenched his teeth. “I’d hoped you’d accept my idea as a solution. Now that jackanapes, Bartholomew, is going to steal her away. He’s so damned perfect, I want to vomit.”

“Lord Bart? I’ve never seen him chase a skirt.”

Stephan leaned forward. “Do you think he’s...?”

“No, I don’t mean that. I’m surprised he’s your competition, is all.” She swigged again from the bottle, then set it on the floor between her boots.

Stephan collapsed back against his chair. “Blast. For a moment, I had hope.”

Her braid was coming loose. She picked at the knotted ribbon holding it together. “She’d do well to marry him. He’s a good, steady sort.”

“Not like me.”

Cass let out a short laugh. “You flitter from place to place doing whatever suits the moment. This,” she pointed to the next room again, “is a perfect example. You do things because you can, not because you should.”

She was right. Damn her. He’d gotten ahead of what was possible. If only he could convince her to take his offer, he could begin to sort the rest.

“I’ve made mistakes,” he said to Cass, as an idea began to form. “I do tend to dash into the street without checking for carriages first. The brewhouse is different. It’s the one idea I’ve been true to for years and years. Come with me. See for yourself. I *can* afford a steady stipend for you, now that Montborne’s bought in. I’ll pay you in perpetuity, if that’s what you want.”

She shook her head. Sadness shadowed her face. “I’m leaving, Stephan. I told you I would.”

“But you don’t have to!”

She shook her head again. “This is not home.”

Panic shot through him. “Which way are you going? I’ll ride out with you. We’ll part ways at the first tavern. Please. Let me show you why I haven’t given up making this work.”

She made him wait an age. Finally, she reached for the brandy bottle between her legs. “If you’re ready at first light, you may join me.”

He sagged with relief. “You’ll see. I’ve done everything right, for once.”

She handed him the bottle, then rose. “Get some sleep. *Sleep,*

Stephan.”

He looked at the closed door. She was right again.

Damn her.

Chapter 18

HE HAD NOT COME. Georgiana pushed her spoon around on her plate, making yellow circles with the remains of yolk from her poached egg. She'd waited. She'd feared. She'd hoped. He hadn't joined her in her bedchamber, and he seemed about to miss breakfast, too.

Her teapot was empty and cold. Apart from requesting another, she had no more excuse for being here. She organized her dishes to make them easier for the footman to clear them, then rose.

The servant immediately straightened in deference.

She'd never grow used to that.

"Woods, did the earl break his fast early today?"

The footman beamed, pleased to have the information. "Why, yes, miss. He and Lady Cass took their meal before Cook were even awake. Cold ham and a loaf, for the road."

"They left?" Georgiana froze with alarm.

"He said just the day, miss. Didn't take a change of clothes."

She didn't know what to think. "Thank you, Woods," she murmured, drawing her shawl tighter. Her mind conjured all sorts of reasons he might have left without explanation. *It's just for a few hours. Don't be silly. It's naught to do with you.*

Easy to tell herself, but not as simple to believe.

She'd come down to breakfast as soon as reasonable. He must have left very early if she'd missed him. Had she heard them drive away? But no, the purpose of her room being relocated to the rear of the house was to separate herself from the noise.

Where had they gone? More importantly, did this mean Lady Cassandra had accepted the terms? Or did it mean she hadn't?

Georgiana was like to make herself sick before he returned. Despite dragging breakfast out as long as possible—a purely foolish effort, now that she knew Stephan wasn't even at home—it was hours yet before she could expect Aunt Millie to awaken.

Could she face her aunt? Now that she knew, without a doubt, she wanted Lord de Winter in her bed?

That was a situation that required attention.

The thought made Georgiana want to hide.

Then she remembered Lord Bart's offer to take her driving later that day. When had her life become so complicated and dramatic?

Georgiana turned on her heel and headed for the drawing room. She ought to write to Elinor. Nothing specific, mind, but organizing her thoughts on paper might help make sense of them.

She'd just handed her letter to Woods when the butler arrived to announce Lord Bartholomew Alexander.

Her pulse quickened as he entered. He was just as tall and solemn as she remembered. If he were a rector, she'd attend church every day.

His black greatcoat swirled about his well-muscled legs, but it was his neatly clipped hair and simple cravat that caught her attention. Lord Bart likely dressed himself. If he did use the services of a valet, it was a dour man who took his responsibility seriously, not a young sop who fancied himself a dandy.

Georgiana snapped herself from her reverie. What a fine kettle of fish. She was infatuated with her aunt's entirely unsuitable suitor—a recovering degenerate!—but her head remained attached enough so that she knew she ought not to reject Lord Bart without giving him a chance.

She pasted a smile on her face and demurred as Lord Bart kissed the air above her bare knuckles. Her gloves lay across the side of the writing desk where she'd left them. As soon as he released her hand, she drew them over her ink-stained fingers. Yet she could still recall the warmth of him through his supple kid gloves.

What would she have done if Stephan had come to her last night? Would she have still stepped out with Lord Bart today? Could she have kissed one man by night and encouraged another by day?

Would she have told her aunt any of it?

Her belly clenched at the thought. She should be glad Stephan hadn't sneaked through their adjoining door. This situation was spinning out of her control. She lusted after her aunt's lover! Where were her morals?

When she returned to the house, she vowed. She'd tell Aunt Millie everything when she returned.

For now, she must not let this opportunity pass.

Lord Bart drove a team with the same steady confidence with which he seemed to do everything else. Georgiana gripped the frame of the phaeton, nonetheless. She'd never been so high in the air. One startle and she'd be broken across the cobblestones.

"Shall I slow the horses?" he asked solicitously.

She looked askance at him from beneath her bonnet. "I'm being silly, aren't I?"

"These high flyers are dangerous, Miss Conley. I've never tried

driving one while making polite conversation.”

Not many men would make such an admission. She unclenched her hand, though she didn't let go. “Is this your vehicle? You drive it well. I'm the ninny.”

“Nothing wrong with a bit of caution. I'm afraid it's not mine. I borrowed it from Roman. I've been thinking I should have invited you for a walk, instead.” He laughed. “I don't mind admitting I was trying to impress you. I've only managed to frighten us both.”

She laughed with him. Modesty was an attractive quality in a man.

He guided the horses into a tight right turn as they sought to avoid a stalled wagon. “There's the entrance to Hyde Park. We'll alight and walk the team inside, if you like.”

She didn't feel an awareness in her belly as Lord Bart hefted her down from the phaeton. He smelled nice, like leather-bound books and shaving soap, but she didn't want to burrow her face against his neck. His was a comforting sort of presence. Exactly what she ought to seek in a husband.

They tied the team to a tree and strolled along the Serpentine. Lord Bart adhered to light topics of conversation. Nothing untoward, no innuendo, nothing too personal. She was left with the same sense of him that she'd had from the start, which was to say, she'd be a fool to turn down an offer of marriage from him.

“I suppose I ought to play coy, Miss Conley,” he said, as he escorted her back to Lord de Winter's front door, “but I'd like to see you again tomorrow. Would it be to your liking if I sent 'round an invitation for you, your aunt, and Lord de Winter to join us for dinner? If I've misjudged, please say so.”

Twenty years. She'd done everything right for twenty years, and never once seen a star, let alone been within grasping distance of it. Now she had two within her reach, all because she'd tossed the proverbial rulebook from a window.

Why stop now?

Chapter 19

GETTING SOTTED WITH HIS SISTER had seemed a brilliant idea at the time. They hadn't done so in a dozen years or more, since before he'd caused all this mess between them.

The next day, however, while attempting to settle his queasy stomach with a crust of dry bread, squeezed into a booth in a corner of the busy tavern, Stephan realized she'd got him soused on purpose.

Cassandra had slipped out in the night. Or maybe she'd left early in the morning—he'd slept face down for hours on the thin-ticked mattress the proprietor had tossed on the floor of her room.

At least Stephan could be glad of that: The inn had been so full, he hadn't been able to let a room when it had become apparent he wasn't going to make it home.

He had a hazy memory of turning to Cass and crowing, "Did you hear that? No rooms! We're a mad success!"

They'd called for another round.

He was suffering for it now. When he'd consumed at least a bathtub's worth of tea, Stephan paid up with the innkeeper and hauled himself back onto his horse despite protestations from his stomach.

Every piece of his attire was wrinkled and smelled of stale ale and fried fish. He felt as though he'd had an hour of sleep despite it being mid-afternoon. And his head. Oh, his head.

It was going to be a ride of shame through London when he finally reached the city. But he supposed it had been worth it.

Cassandra had said yes.

She'd said yes.

He spurred his horse into a canter. Every thud of hooves banged straight into his brainbox, but he didn't slow. He must be home. He couldn't wait to tell Georgiana the good news.

Yes, he was mortgaged up to his eyeballs. And he must surrender the Mayfair townhouse lease. He had no expectation beyond a modest salary for the next decade or so. But he was free to marry as he liked, so long as his wife was willing to live frugally.

He suspected Georgiana wouldn't mind.

Hours later, his house was silent as he doffed his gloves, coat and hat. No far-off sounds of clinking silverware. No murmured voices filtering from the dining room. He didn't even detect the dinner smells his rumbling stomach had been anticipating.

Where was everyone?

The footman, Woods, was the first to reach him. "So sorry, my lord. We didn't expect you after dark."

"No matter. Where is everyone?"

The footman blushed. "Belowstairs. Cook said dinner wouldn't keep, so we started early. What with the ladies dining out tonight—"

Stephan paused. His hackles rose. "Where?"

"I'm not sure, my lord."

Stephan reached for the coat he'd just hung on the wall. "Then find someone who does know. I want to know where they went."

"Yes, my lord." Woods paused awkwardly. "Er, shall I send for your valet?"

Stephan cocked his head. "Are you suggesting something, lad?"

The footman sputtered. "N-no, my lord. It's just that I thought perhaps... That is, you might be keen to have a change of clothes, or a shave, or maybe just a... a spritz of perfume... I meant no offense, my lord."

Stephan frowned as he tugged his greatcoat into place. He went to the mirror. Even in the unlit foyer, he could see he looked a fright. Now that he'd taken his coat off and put it back on, he realized it smelled like wet dog. "No shave," he said, relenting. "Send up hot water and Mr. Knightly for a change of clothes. And find out where they went."

It took almost an entire hour for Stephan to freshen up and arrive at Roman's door. He shouldn't have let Woods talk him into even a partial toilette, once he'd known where the women were dining. Every minute felt like one he'd lost.

He'd seen how Bart looked at Georgiana. They would have gone for their drive yesterday. Dinner together tonight could only mean one thing.

Stephan might be too late.

Georgiana was the only one who looked surprised when he entered the room. She stared at him as if she couldn't believe he'd come. Roman, Bart, and Roman's wife, Lucy, continued bickering, even as they smiled or inclined their head in bare acknowledgment of his arrival.

They'd all been familiar for so long, he didn't expect a king's welcome.

"It was the most ridiculous play I've ever seen!" Roman exclaimed, stabbing his knife in the air for emphasis. "No one enjoyed it. You

can't take Miss Conley. I forbid it."

What remained of Stephan's appetite disappeared. Bart was already planning a third engagement, apparently. His drive with Georgiana must have gone well.

"It's for the people-watching," Lucy said, smiling at Georgiana. "Everyone loves the spectacle of the theatre. Don't listen to him."

Georgiana offered Lucy a half smile. She set her fork aside. Then her gaze found Stephan's again, and he had hope.

He didn't know what to do next. Drop down on one knee? Pretend nothing was amiss?

How had this become such a muddle?

Millie reclined in her chair as if it were a longue. She held up her wine glass to be refilled by a footman, then brought it to her lips. Her eyes were trained on Stephan. One red brow rose.

A muddle, to be sure.

"Miss Conley has never attended a play," Bart said. He'd turned to acknowledge Stephan when he'd first entered the room, but Bart's attention had returned to his brother and sister-by-law. "I'm doing my best to be exciting. The least you can do is stop trying to talk her out of it."

"Forewarned is forearmed, and all that," Roman said, taking a sip of wine. "It's quite stupid, Miss Conley. Don't hold it against my brother if you hate it."

She glanced at her host and nodded politely, then picked up her fork. Her skin burned bright red, even in the warm glow of candlelight. She made a show of selecting another slice of meat from the platter in the middle of the table.

"I think we've embarrassed Georgiana enough," Lucy said. "Time to turn our attention to Lord de Winter."

"You're late. And you look terrible," Roman accused, switching targets obediently. "I wonder why you rushed over? It's just a bit of goose and pudding."

Stephan drew a hand over his stubbled jaw. "You're jealous because you can't grow a proper beard."

"Hardly." Roman ran his fingers through his curly hair. The ringlets shone as they sprang back into perfect disarray. "I've the best head of hair in London. Why would I want a carpet on my face?" His blue eyes raked Stephan up and down. "No, I think you came with completely unnecessary haste. Even from ten paces, I can see you need a bath."

Stephan strode to the table and pulled out the chair beside Millie's, where the plate set for him hadn't yet been cleared.

She leaned toward him and whispered conspiratorially, "You're just in time."

He raised his brows in question.

She bent to speak in his ear. "Charades."

"Charades?" That wasn't what he'd expected her to say.

She nodded, then leaned back. A cheroot rolled between her fingers, ready for her after-dinner smoke. "Games." She smiled slyly.

"I suspect it will be winner-take-all tonight."

“WE SHOULD PLAY gentlemen against ladies,” Lucy said, drawing a line down a sheet of paper.

Georgiana began rearranging the tea tray that had been brought into the drawing room. It wasn't her place to pour out for Lucy's guests, but Georgiana couldn't help adjusting the plates and checking the teapot. It gave her something to do apart from admire Lord de Winter.

She'd never realized a dusting of dark stubble along a man's jaw could be her undoing.

“Egads, no,” Lord Montborne objected. He rose from his squat in front of the fireplace, where he'd been prodding the flames with a brass-handled poker. “You females will sweep the board. Besides, I want you to be on my team, darling.”

“That's cheating.” Lord Bart handed his brother a snifter half-full of brandy.

Lord Montborne grinned rakishly. “Is it?”

“I'll join Lord and Lady Montborne.” Aunt Millie planted herself on the settee beside Lucy. “I like to win.”

“That won't be necessary,” Lord Montborne replied. “Now that Lord de Winter has bothered to join us, we can play in teams of two.”

“But I've already drawn a line down the middle!” Lucy protested, pointing to the evidence.

Her husband laughed and snatched up the paper and pencil from her lap. He split one section in half. “There. Now, who shall partner whom?”

Georgiana studied the tea tray. A small nudge... here... If she turned the teapot just so...

This would have been worlds simpler if Stephan had not come.

“Miss Conley,” Lord Bart said, forcing her to look up. “Would you do me the honor of partnering me in this entirely unfair game devised by my petulant brother who can't abide the thought of losing?”

She tried to appear as pleased as she would have been, had Stephan stayed home like he ought to have done instead of barreling into the middle of dinner looking like a man bursting with news.

Had Lady Cassandra said yes?

Holding her question was going to kill her. But the way he'd looked at her since arriving gave her hope. Surely, if his sister had rejected his offer of an annuity, he'd appear dejected.

If only they could have a moment alone! Impossible, that. They were at Lord Bart's house, for goodness sakes. She was being courted by him in front of his family. Moreover, she hadn't found the courage to discuss her feelings for Stephan with Aunt Millie, as she'd promised herself she'd do, and she didn't want to catch her aunt unawares.

She owed Aunt Millie that, at least.

Given all the reasons why she had no choice but to continue on, Georgiana rose and joined Lord Bart on his side of the room. "Thank you, my lord." Her fleeting glance at Stephan begged him to understand she could not embarrass Lord Bart.

A flash of frustration crossed his face. Impossible to tell if he understood her message, or not.

Aunt Millie raised a hand toward Stephan. He responded immediately. Ever the gentleman, he helped her rise and led her to a settee of their own. Aunt Millie rested one arm against the back of the couch and leaned away from Stephan, her shimmering bodice reflecting the light of a single sconce above their heads.

Georgiana and Lord Bart chose wingback chairs.

Somehow, she managed to enjoy herself. She didn't even lock eyes with Stephan more than a dozen times. Charades, with all its silliness, wasn't a game she usually played. When one felt like the responsible party in the house, one must mind perceptions. As a game amongst peers, however, she felt free to be expressive.

"Milking a cow!" Lord Bart guessed as she pantomimed, squeezing her fists in the air.

She shook her head and exaggerated her movements.

He fired off more possibilities without hesitation. "Decorating a cake! Plaiting hair! Driving a team!"

"Yes!" Georgiana exclaimed. She grinned at him. "Very good, Lord Bart!"

He beamed at her.

Lord de Winter stood. "My turn."

Georgiana looked at him from beneath her lashes. "Of course," she demurred, then fairly skipped back to her chair.

She and Lord Bart were winning. By a safe margin, considering the hour was so late.

She glanced at her partner. She had a feeling everything with Lord Bart was conducted within a safe margin.

And then he surprised her.

"Miss Conley, we are the clear victors. Would you care to take a

turn about the conservatory with me? These four can fight over second place.”

Her mouth opened slightly. She couldn't look at Stephan. Could. Not. Shame. Lord. Bart.

Her gaze darted to Stephan, anyway.

He was staring daggers at Lord Bart. Georgiana suddenly felt a swell of pure, unadulterated power. Good heavens! She'd never flown on the wings of euphoria like this.

Jealousy, it seemed, was everything.

This was so very, very badly done of her. Enjoying it went against everything she'd ever been taught, all the admonitions she'd ever preached, and every warning she'd ever insisted her sisters heed. Nevertheless, she was learning a shocking truth:

Georgiana Conley had a very wicked streak.

She risked a look about the room. Lord Montborne and Lucy were openly riveted. Aunt Millie had found a deck of cards and was shuffling it with the greatest possible expression of boredom. Lord Bart was openly ignoring Lord de Winter.

That only seemed to infuriate Stephan more.

“Miss Conley?” Lord Bart rose and offered his hand. “Shall we?”

This was not well done of her. She simply couldn't resist. Perhaps because she was almost entirely certain Lord de Winter had been granted his freedom, and it was only a matter of time before they were able to untangle their knot and proceed forward.

It was very likely her last opportunity to walk in the moonlight with another man. It was only prudent to be absolutely sure she was making the right choice, wasn't it?

She smiled at Lord Bart. “I'd be delighted, my lord.”

Chapter 21

LORD BART LED HER down a narrow hallway to the back of the house. They didn't encounter a single servant.

Had Stephan taken her through this shadowy corridor, she'd have assumed he intended a rendezvous. She didn't expect Lord Bart to try for anything more than a chaste kiss.

The temperature notched higher as they neared the conservatory. Loamy soil and citrus zest filled the air. Lord Bart opened the door. Moonlight spilled across the floor, flooding through the glass roof.

Georgiana waited while he lit torches at intervals around the room.

"We try not to keep lamps burning," he said, adjusting the last wick with precision. "No sense wasting money, even if we're more flush than we've ever been."

"I don't mind waiting. I've never been in such a large conservatory."

He looked around, as if trying to see it through her eyes. "We played here as boys. I remember it as a true jungle. Jarring to realize it's only the size of a small bedchamber."

She laughed.

His fingertips grazed the broad leaf of a bromeliad. "I haven't been here in a while. My mother refuses to allow Roman to tear it down."

Georgiana was aghast. "How could he? This is a lovely space."

Lord Bart made his way back to her. He offered his arm. "Under scrutiny, you'd see the frame is molding. Several of the glass panes have cracked. Roman doesn't want to spend the money to repair it when he prefers a larger garden."

Lord Bart led her to a tiered shelf housing a dozen different species of orchid. He moved to the end of the display. "None of us Alexanders have a green thumb, or any interest in cultivating one. Mr. Benjamin, our butler, keeps these. I'd hate to take that small pleasure away from him."

"They're beautiful. I only wish I could see them in daylight." She bent toward the nearest bloom to better determine its color. "Mauve, with an amethyst center, I think." When she looked at Lord Bart for affirmation, she realized he was staring at her.

“You’re in love with de Winter.” A statement of fact, not an accusation.

Her heart stopped. She straightened slowly.

She had no ready reply.

“You needn’t admit it. I’m an absolute boor for saying it aloud. We both know it’s true, though. Forgive me.”

She hesitated. What on earth did one do with that?

He hadn’t finished his piece. “I’m quite smitten with you, Miss Conley. I think we’d do well together. If I thought you wanted me, I’d make a formal offer of marriage right here, right now.”

He paused. Her mind went blank. No man had ever come close to saying anything like that. She felt lightheaded.

An eternity passed. With the barest encouragement, perhaps he’d make his offer. But she couldn’t do it.

He turned to study the orchid display again. He rocked on his heels. “My tender feelings cause me to speak plainly. May I offer some advice?”

She could barely nod her acquiescence. To do anything else would be rude.

Lord Bart turned toward her. The barrister was about to speak. “I’m no rake, Miss Conley, but I’ve seen enough to make an informed observation. I think you meant to make Lord de Winter jealous tonight. You must do better than that. You are better than that.”

She felt her face erupt into flames. “I wasn’t—”

“We must be honest with each other. I promised advice. Here it is. You may be above thirty years of age but you are playing a young girl’s game. How difficult is it to stoke a man’s jealousy? The answer is: not at all. If he has even the slightest interest, he can be made into a raving lunatic with the bat of an eyelash. It is no grand achievement to play two men against each other.”

She wanted to die of embarrassment. “I’m so sorry, my lord.”

“Don’t apologize. I fear your inexperience combined with your age will result in overconfidence and eventual disappointment. You cannot continue these antics.”

“No, my lord,” was all she could manage.

He didn’t relent. “There’s a reason my brother didn’t want to bring de Winter into a contract. He’s good fun, depend upon it. But he’s easy to be around because he makes himself amiable to every idea, no matter how terrible. The fact is, you don’t need to make Lord de Winter jealous to provoke him to action. He’s the most easily led man on earth. Simply tell him what you want, and he’ll oblige.”

She gasped. “You’re hard on him, my lord!”

“No more than he deserves. De Winter never plays a long game. He’s capricious to a fault. He was trotting happily behind your aunt

until you arrived. How quickly did you have him wrapped around your finger? Have you seen any evidence of a depth of feeling for you, or anyone, for that matter?"

She shook her head slowly.

"Ask him to kiss you, and he will. Ask him to marry you, and he will. Ask him to give up everything he's worked toward. It's that easy."

"I wouldn't!"

"Nor should you," Lord Bart said. "I'm only saying that you could have anything you wanted from him because he will never say no. But is that what you want? Or do you want him to act purely of his own accord? Because if it's the latter, you must change what you've been doing immediately."

She glanced at her clasped hands. This was the most mortifying conversation of her life, but a part of her was grateful to be having it. Better to have her errors pointed out by him than to learn belatedly it had all been a mirage of her own making.

"What do you suggest, then, Lord Bart?" she asked, when it seemed he'd say no more.

He laughed hollowly. "Foremost, I'd advise you to forget that jackanapes. But I know you won't. Most everyone feels a soul-consuming obsession their first time. You've no choice but to see this to its inevitable and painful conclusion."

She flushed even hotter. "I'm no schoolgirl."

"I don't care if you're ninety-six years old. You're green as a lass."

She pressed her lips together.

"But you do have a leg up most don't have," he allowed.

"I do?"

He nodded. "Your aunt has more experience than everyone I know. She'd have better advice than I. But I will offer a male perspective. If you want him to come to you of his own accord, you must cease behaving in ways he can't resist."

She gave Lord Bart a questioning look, barely willing to admit she wasn't sure what he meant.

Lord Bart ticked his fingers. "Don't make him jealous. Don't make winning you into a game, where you pretend you don't want him and he is driven to change your mind. Those ploys will succeed, because they always do. Mark my words, they won't prove anything except there's a reason such stratagems exist. Instead, tell him in plain terms you've decided it's not in your best interests to continue with him and leave it at that."

She drew a ragged breath. "And then what?"

Lord Bart shrugged. "He will give up."

"Oh." Air whooshed out of her.

He took a step closer. "I'm sorry, Miss Conley. You'll see how easily he is pushed away. Lord de Winter has few intentions of his own. He's a follower, at heart."

If only she thought Lord Bart had it wrong! She had a sinking feeling that if she examined every interaction she'd had with the earl, she'd find Lord Bart had described it exactly.

She sniffled, embarrassing herself all over again.

"You've nothing to be ashamed of, Miss Conley. It is precisely because you've led such a respectable life that you find yourself enamored with a wayward rogue whose devotion is too good to be true. I admire you for it, actually." He grasped her hand and kissed her knuckles. "I'll be waiting, should you have a change of heart."

MILLIE PASSED STEPHAN'S CHEROOT BACK. She drew slowly on her own, having used the end of his to light hers. The two tips glowed and crackled in the quiet darkness of Montborne's unlit balcony, like the burning pit in the center of Stephan's belly.

"I don't know why you're still here," she said to him, expelling a cloud of smoke over her shoulder. "I certainly don't require company."

He made a noncommittal noise. His throat was too tight to speak.

Across the way, a light went out. A horse whinnied in the mews.

He flicked a bit of ash over the rail.

"You must tell her how you feel," Millie said, pressing him. "I've no doubt, Lord Bart is being more forthcoming down there than you."

Stephan growled, knowing she was right. Yet he was unable to tear himself away from staring at the conservatory glowing beneath them. Its lighted torches burned like jealousy in his belly. "I can't."

"Nonsense."

He flicked his cheroot again, watching ash tumble below. Most of his cheroot had burned away without his involvement. His heart wasn't in smoking anymore, not after Georgiana had given him an earful at the salon so many weeks ago.

When he'd kissed her because he'd been drawn to that wicked mouth of hers. Or had she begged him to do it?

"Lord Bart is an eminently better choice," Stephan said. "I have many poor qualities, but selfishness isn't one of them."

"Horse shit."

He gave up pretending to enjoy his cheroot and stamped it out. Then he turned to her, resting an elbow on the railing. "Tell me why standing aside to make way for a more desirable match isn't the purest form of sacrifice?"

She scoffed. "Making the choice for her isn't heroic."

Fear clutched him by the throat. He was terrified Georgiana might prefer Lord Bart over himself. But he'd never, ever admit it.

With Millie, he didn't have to. She laid her cheroot on the railing, then turned to him and crossed her arms under her breasts. "I don't know if she'll have you or not. We don't discuss you. I imagine my

history with you is an awkward thing for her to accept, though I daresay she's managed it well. But I'm not the one who needs to be told what she thinks about you."

She gave him a pointed look before continuing. "What I do know is allowing Lord Bart any foothold is tantamount to surrendering. He means to make a case for himself. I saw it in his eyes as he stole her away right under your nose."

"Georgiana isn't a sack of coins. She went willingly."

Millie shrugged. "Mayhap she does prefer him, then."

Stephan scowled. His hand closed into a fist as he imagined planting Bart a facer. "You're no help."

"On the contrary, I'm a splendid matchmaker." She retrieved her cheroot from the rail and took a long, satisfied draw. "I'm nothing short of genius."

He surrendered his fantasy of punching that smug smirk off Bart's face. In truth, he'd never try to come between Georgiana and her heart, if Lord Bart was what she wanted.

He turned to grip the railing with both hands. His knuckles shone white in the moonlight as he tried to make sense of it all. How things had spun around on him so quickly? He'd been so close to having her. What had gone wrong?

"Georgiana thinks I'm going to propose to you," he said, realizing it almost exactly as he spoke the words aloud.

"Oh?" Millie exhaled over her shoulder. "Why?"

"Because I was."

As he'd expected, she received this news with indifference. Marrying her would have indeed been a mistake.

"I haven't had a chance to tell her otherwise," he said. "Mayhap that's affected her decisions tonight."

"Hmm." Millie leaned on the railing beside him. "If only there were a way to talk to her."

"It's not that I can't," he said, defensively.

"So we're in agreement."

He growled with annoyance.

She smiled deviously. "Lord Bart is handsome. Intelligent. Well spoken. Kind. I've spent most of the evening wondering how he looks out of those breeches."

"I thought you were on my side."

Millie laughed her deep, husky laugh. "How sweet."

He shook his head. She cared for him, but she wasn't in love with him. It wasn't a surprise by any means. Yet he longed for more.

He longed for... Georgiana.

His attention slid to the conservatory again. Two silhouettes moved into view. From so far above, he had nothing more than the

sense of Georgiana and Bart. His imagination was more than capable of filling in the rest.

His heart plummeted. Millie was right, he shouldn't have stood aside. He ought to have declared himself on the spot and damn the consequences. Now Georgiana had no doubt secured a very good offer of marriage from an entirely more reputable man.

"She very well may choose him over you," Millie said beside him. "But I wouldn't."

Chapter 23

THE LAST THING IN THE WORLD Georgiana wanted to do was speak to Aunt Millie about Lord de Winter. Even her *Ladies' Companions* had no advice to give on the subject of falling in love with one's aunt's special friend. Yet they had too much privacy in the carriage, as Stephan had chosen to return home on horseback, and really, it must be done at some point.

Georgiana could feel her aunt's curiosity brimming over. "I think I've earned at least a brief summary of your walk with Lord Bart," Aunt Millie said, her tone teasing. "After all I've done for you."

Georgiana grimaced.

"He has the most beautiful legs," Aunt Millie mused. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"It's his character I most admire."

"All that morality," her aunt agreed. "Delicious."

Georgiana was almost inured to her aunt's attempts to rile her. "You're quite impossible, did you know that, Aunt Millie?"

Her bedroom eyes looked positively wicked as she continued her attempt to shock Georgiana. "Women deserve pleasure. We crave it. Lust is nothing to be ashamed about, my dear niece."

Georgiana blushed and looked away.

"We've agreed Lord Bart's limbs need more investigation," Aunt Millie said, for she seemed determined to open Georgiana's mind to the idea of female desire. "What is your opinion of Stephan's evening shadow? I don't know why more men don't skip their shave every once in a while. It puts one in mind of a long night of debauchery—"

"Aunt Millie, please!" Georgiana couldn't sit and listen to her aunt salivate over Stephan's disheveled appearance or Bart's thickly muscled calves. She simply couldn't.

Aunt Millie smiled slyly. She wasn't going to let up.

Very well. This was it. The perfect and perhaps only chance to tell Aunt Millie everything. Aunt Millie was determined to have it out. Except there was nothing more awkward than asking forgiveness for falling in love with one's aunt's former lover. Quite literally nothing compared.

Georgiana wanted to be anywhere else.

But that was cowardice, again. Their carriage would arrive home soon and the only thing worse than having this conversation here would be having it in a well-lit drawing room. She must lay it out before she missed her chance to say it in the dark.

"Aunt Millie, I must speak to you," she said, her gaze locked on the windowpane.

"Oh, yes. I think you must." Aunt Millie scooted against the squab, as if settling in for a delightful tale. She must have at least a semblance of an idea of what Georgiana was about to say. Or she knew everything. She was far too observant for Georgiana's liking.

If only that made this easier.

Georgiana sucked in a fortifying breath. Truly, it was now or never.

Her confession burst forth, finally free. "To my great embarrassment, I find I have... feelings... for Lord de Winter. I pray you'll forgive me, Aunt Millie. I should not covet your friend."

"Why not?" Aunt Millie didn't sound the least surprised. Or annoyed. More like... intrigued. "Where does it say you can't love a man I greatly admire?"

"In the Bible!" Georgiana didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "It's literally written in the Bible, Aunt Millie."

"Oh, posh. 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife' was clearly aimed at men. They do entirely stupid things out of jealousy. We women are much more capable of talking things out amongst ourselves."

Georgiana shook her head, certain Aunt Millie could rationalize any sin. This time, though, she was glad of it. She risked facing her aunt. "You're not angry?"

"No, no." Aunt Millie gazed at her. "It would be terribly unfair to be angry, when I've gone to so much trouble to toss you two together."

Georgiana's stomach sank. "What do you mean?"

Aunt Millie shrugged. "I told you from the start, Stephan is a lovely man. He just required more nudging than average, and you, well, you needed a full-on shove. I'm glad to see you're finally coming around."

Georgiana's ears began to ring. Questions immediately bubbled to the surface. How? Why? When had she decided this?

But the one revelation she latched onto was the one that sounded the most like what Lord Bart had told her. "Why do you say Lord de Winter required prodding?" *And how much prodding have you done?*

She was terrified to hear the answer.

Aunt Millie dug through her coat pockets. She withdrew a silver cheroot case. It glinted in the darkness as she opened it. "Lady

Cassandra browbeat Stephan for almost three years until he finally agreed to marry an heiress of her choosing. He admitted straight-on that would only make him miserable, but he couldn't stand to disappoint her any longer. I saw a chance to give him what he wanted."

"What was that?"

"Time." Aunt Millie withdrew a cheroot. She rolled it between her fingers, evening out the tobacco. "His main objection to a quick engagement was that it wouldn't be a love match."

"I see." Georgiana clutched her hands together in her lap. Her heart beat faster. "What has that to do with me?"

"Nothing."

"But you said—"

"I said he wanted time. I gave him time. That's why we're here."

Georgiana's heart stopped. Lord Bart was more correct than even he knew. "I could have been anyone, then."

"Not anyone." Aunt Millie pulled a face. "Not Abigail, for instance."

That didn't make Georgiana feel better. Especially not in light of everything else. "You thought merely being under the same roof would be enough. You believed he wouldn't be able to resist."

Aunt Millie shrugged again. "It's nearly impossible for two young people to be near each other day and night without some sort of attachment forming. Perhaps you'd have despised each other, but you weren't likely to be indifferent. Besides, there are thousands of men in London. We were hardly on a fool's errand."

Georgiana sucked in a lungful of air. She would not cry. She would not.

"What's wrong, child?"

"You're saying Lord de Winter had no choice but to form a *tendre* for me. You made him do it."

"Posh. I didn't make him do anything."

But she had orchestrated an elaborate plot. Lord Bart was right. Stephan had been manipulated into an attachment.

"You forgot one detail, though," Georgiana said, looking back into the night. "I'm no heiress. He was planning to marry you, instead."

Aunt Millie laughed outright. "We were not about to be married."

Her stomach unknotted the barest bit to hear Aunt Millie reject Stephan. But she remained devastated to have Lord Bart's accusations confirmed.

Aunt Millie trailed a fingertip along the velvet curtain beside her. "I don't judge his faults. That's why we get on. Human nature is what it is. There is very little that is truly bad behavior." She thought a moment. "Murder, perhaps. And the like of it."

Aunt Millie meant to be comforting. Yet she was confirming everything Lord Bart had said about his temperament. Perhaps worst of all, Aunt Millie had shoved in him Georgiana's direction.

No, she'd all but locked them in a room.

Seeing it laid out together was like pinning the pattern of a dress. Georgiana could no longer deny Lord Bart was right.

"I thought he was in love with me," Georgiana stated flatly, dejected.

"He might be. Have you asked?"

Georgiana sank further into despair. "I fear he cannot possibly answer of his own accord. Lady Cassandra, you, me, we've been pulling his strings as if he's a marionette. What does *he* want? Does he even wish to marry? He's young. Perhaps he prefers to sow his oats."

Aunt Millie scoffed. "That man has had more than his share of oats. It's barley now. Real, actual barley. He's put down roots. He wants a family. Does it matter if I've helped him along a little? I helped you, child. Do you think my machinations have forced you to fall in love with him?"

"No," Georgiana said without hesitation.

Aunt Millie raised her hands. "It's the same with him."

Georgiana considered that. "An arranged marriage does not create love. If it did, Lord de Winter wouldn't object to marrying an heiress."

Her aunt's eyes sparkled. "Just so."

Emboldened, Georgiana continued, "Lord Bart says I've lured Lord de Winter with feminine tricks."

"I warned Stephan that man would use every argument at his disposal. What is his point?"

"He says men cannot resist giving chase."

Aunt Millie settled back, seeming satisfied Lord Bart hadn't said anything of importance. "So?"

Georgiana thought it obvious. "A good marriage can't be based on games."

"Why ever not?"

"It just seems wrong!"

Aunt Millie gave her a pitying look. "That's what flirting is. What did you think?"

"I just..." Georgiana stared at her hands. Aunt Millie seemed to view life as a play to be acted out. But Georgiana didn't want a performance. "I want to know he wants me. Not because I demand proof. Not even because another man makes him jealous." She clasped her hands to her breasts. "I don't want a pretty speech provoked by a moment of fear, but a true, from-the-heart declaration, with points laid out and conclusions drawn. I want him to fight for me because he loves me, and I want him to love me because I am me. Am I a fool?"

Aunt Millie grimaced. "You ask for more than most men are willing to give."

Georgiana shook her head. "Lord Bart proved otherwise."

"Don't knight him just yet. The man is a barrister, for God's sakes. He can make anything sound logical."

Georgiana narrowed her eyes. "Do you dislike him?"

Aunt Millie scoffed. "He's too beautiful to hate. I just don't want you to make a poor choice because things aren't as perfect in life as they are on the pages of your *Ladies' Companion*."

Georgiana let out a cry of indignation. Those magazines, again!

Aunt Millie shrugged. "Stephan may never come up to scratch, not the way you want. Or he may make the most beautiful speech in the world and you won't believe a word of it, even if it's all true. Before you toss him aside because some other man told you to, talk to him. Learn for yourself how deep his feelings run."

Aunt Millie raised her chin as the carriage drew to a halt. "We have more power than society wants us to believe, Georgiana. You must learn to wield yours."

Chapter 24

GEORGIANA CONSIDERED ALL the advice she'd received as she prepared herself for bed. Her brain was crowded but in functioning order, thank goodness. Her heart was a mess.

By picking apart Lord Bart's and Aunt Millie's positions, she found a common thread. She must speak to Stephan.

She wouldn't coerce him. No matter what Aunt Millie said, she didn't want a husband who had to be manipulated into marriage. Even if, every second he didn't come to see her, it seemed that was exactly what had been done.

She looked at the clock. Good or bad, she must find out what was taking place in his head. She was on the verge of losing her mind.

It might mean learning he had, indeed, been driven to forming a *tendre* for her.

But at least she'd know. It took another hour to decide whether or not she should find out tonight. She knew she *shouldn't* go to him. It was improper. Confronting him meant he had not fought for her. But their rooms adjoined. It would be so easy to knock on their shared door and confer with him in private.

It would also be private.

Did that violate Lord Bart's directive?

It must.

Yet she'd never be able to sleep if she didn't talk to Stephan first. The later it became, the more she wanted to hear him explain why he'd let her go so easily.

She stopped herself before she knocked on their adjoining door. This wasn't a matter of life and death. Safer to wait and approach him on more neutral ground.

Not in his bedchamber. At night.

Her need for answers was perfectly logical, though. She was within her rights to confront him. If she went to him fully clothed, as staid as a governess, and asked how he felt about her, there could be no harm in it.

She'd return to her room once she'd spoken to him. Propriety would be observed.

She'd go to sleep.

Probably.

She glanced at the clock for what seemed the seventy-fifth time. They'd all dispersed from the foyer hours ago. If he'd intended to talk to her tonight, he'd have already done so. Every minute she spent in indecision was another *tick-tock* of proof that Lord Bart was right, Stephan wasn't going to fight for her. And if that were true, well, then.

The sooner she accepted he wasn't as doe-eyed about her as she'd been about him, the better.

Why wait any longer? She couldn't be seduced by the man once he'd rejected her to her face.

By the time she'd shed her nightrail and dressed herself in a plain morning gown and shawl, a full three hours had passed since they'd returned from Lord Montborne's house. She twisted her braid and pinned it at the nape of her neck. She even put her slippers back on her feet. Nothing to give him the idea she'd come for anything but answers.

She nodded to herself, then went to the door.

A knock came from the other side. "Georgiana?"

She gasped. Firstly, because he'd frightened the wits out of her. Secondly, because...

Because.

With shaking hands, she opened the door. Her heart pounded something wonderful in her chest. He was beautiful by candlelight. And clean. He smelled delightful, like wash day. Even his hair was still damp.

He was fully dressed.

And he'd come.

"I'm sorry it's so late." He remained on his own side of the door. A nervous smile tilted his lips. "I thought I'd take a bath, but I hadn't considered the fires belowstairs had already been banked. The staff wasn't prepared to boil bathwater in the middle of the night."

She clutched her shawl tightly at her breast. She didn't raise her gaze from his cravat, lest he see her hope shining back. He'd come to her, of his own accord. What did it mean?

"I don't mind," she said, glad her voice didn't shake.

"Couldn't sleep?" If he'd noticed she was dressed for breakfast, he didn't say so.

If he realized she'd been about to knock on the door, he kept it to himself.

He'd come to her. Her entire body seemed to be shaking. She still couldn't wrap her mind around it.

"No, I..." She shrugged, borrowing the gesture from Aunt Millie. She must appear unmoved by his arrival, even if it was everything

she'd wanted. Lord Bart's warning not to make herself too available, or too unavailable, ran through her mind.

She wanted to talk to Stephan, that was all. He was here. It was time.

She stood taller, so she appeared less in need of protection. "I was coming to talk to you, actually."

"You were?" His surprise appeared genuine. Just as quickly, worry flashed across his face.

Was he afraid of what *she* might say?

She felt a little of the power Aunt Millie had told her about. It coursed through her, giving her confidence. "May I come in?" she asked, sensing she'd have more control if she could turn and leave at any time.

His brows shot even higher. But he took a step back and gestured into the velvet-and-silk appointed interior, where only a few candles burned. The rest had sputtered out after a long night.

She hustled past him. She'd never been in a man's bedchamber before. The large bathing tub hadn't been emptied yet. Wet towels draped across the nearest wingback chair.

He closed their adjoining door and then went to stoke the fire.

"Please ignore the mess," he said, a bit sheepishly. "I sent the servants back to bed after they filled the tub. I wasn't expecting—well—this."

She loved him more for that, drat her.

"May I?" She indicated the wingback chair opposite his towels. It had the benefit of also being farther from his bed.

"Please." He stood awkwardly another moment before striding to the bed. He seated himself on the edge. "Is this acceptable?"

She nodded. "Very."

They stared at each other.

"Georgiana—"

"Stephan—"

He smiled. "You first."

She'd been rehearsing her speech for so long, she almost blurted it out. Her mind clicked just fast enough to realize she ought to let him speak. If she wanted to know what he thought, she needed to listen.

"I think it would be better if you began," she said.

"Good," he replied with a short laugh. "Because I've finally found the courage."

She managed a small smile of her own. He was nervous. That must be a good sign. Wasn't it?

She watched with widened eyes as he stood, crossed the large room, and rested one hand against the fireplace. He stared into the flames. "I hated Lord Bart tonight as I've never loathed anyone before.

He's so damned perfect. Any woman would be lucky to have him for a husband. Especially you."

Her heart stopped.

Stephan looked over his shoulder at her. "Truly. I wouldn't blame you if you wanted him. He's better than me in every way. But damn it, Georgiana! I cannot be happy about it."

Her heart started again, this time at a furious pace.

Stephan straightened and turned toward her. "Are you in love with him?"

Instinctively, she wanted to reassure him that she was not. Lord Bart's warning kept her from speaking her heart, though. If she said she loved Stephan, he might feel moved to reciprocate.

She shook her head. "I don't love Lord Bart."

Stephan's voice lowered. "Will you marry him?"

"That depends," she said slowly. She wanted to be honest, without throwing herself directly into his arms. "I haven't received any other offers."

Stephan strode toward her. He dropped to his knee and took her hands in his. "Georgiana. I'm free." He kissed her knuckles, then squeezed her hands as he searched her eyes. His face was so close, she could have leaned forward and kissed him.

She didn't.

"I'm begging you to be my wife," he clarified.

She let out a little hiccup-laugh. "Oh?"

He scooted forward on his knee. He smiled handsomely, though his brow furrowed as he continued to beseech her. "The next few years will be difficult. We'll have no silks, no parties, no holidays in Bath. God knows, I can't afford this house any longer." He clutched her hands so hard, she almost couldn't feel her fingers. "It will be loads of work to stand up the new tavern. I must spare some attention for the brewhouse and inns. I'm afraid we'll be quite busy, and not a lot to show for it at first. But one day, Georgiana, I'll dress you as a true countess. We'll host dinner parties. I'll go to church on Sundays. Please, my darling, say you'll have me."

Tears built in Georgiana's eyes. His was the sincerest entreaty she'd ever heard described. He made life with him sound positively difficult.

She smiled back. "I don't mind hard work. But... what happened to your plans for fortune-hunting? I thought you wanted a rich wife."

He looked at her as if she were daft. "Georgiana, I'm proposing to *you*. Besides, it was my sister who wanted an heiress. I've only ever wanted to be happy."

"Will marriage make you happy?" Georgiana squeezed his fingers. "Now that you may take any wife, or none at all, perhaps you don't want to marry."

“Georgiana! All that work to be done. Do you think I want to go it alone?” He grinned rakishly at her. “Come help me.”

“Oh! You’re impossible!” She laughed, afraid to hope. But there was one thing she must say first.

“I spoke with my aunt,” she began, searching his face. “It seems we’ve been pawns, of a sort. My aunt... Well, she thought we might make a match of it, if we were in each other’s company long enough. This was all a grand plan.”

He went white.

Her stomach dropped.

He must be realizing he’d been manipulated into declaring himself for her.

His hold on her hands eased. He stared at their entangled fingers her lap. “Well. That does change things.”

Georgiana fought her urge to cry.

Stephan sighed heavily. Then he kissed her knuckles again. “I should have known it was all too good to be true. I’m so sorry for wasting your time, dear Georgiana. I thought perhaps you did love me.”

She blinked. “I do love you, Stephan. It’s your hand that has been forced, not mine.”

“Me?” He shook his head vigorously. “I’ve been falling in love with you ever since you took a draught of ale with me in my tavern. I count myself fortunate every day that little scouring maid told me you’d gasped when I came in.”

Georgiana’s lips parted. “She didn’t!”

He smiled wanly at her. “She did. I didn’t believe her, if you must know. But I was curious.” He squeezed her hands again. “I didn’t mean to fall in love with you. But I’m not surprised I did. Your wit is rapier sharp. Every little quandary is a puzzle for you to solve. I’ve never seen you back down from a challenge. You’re quite the opposite of me, in all the best ways. I want you in my life. As a partner, and a friend. As my wife.”

The only sounds were the crackle of the fire and their shallow, nervous breaths.

“Aunt Millie didn’t make you fall in love with me?”

He chuckled. “I don’t think she knows what love is. She certainly didn’t make me do anything. I’ve been aware of you since the day we met. Besides, you’re the only woman I can imagine taking an interest in my alehouses.”

“I do love a good brew,” Georgiana said with a small laugh. Her heart felt lighter than it had ever been. “I will marry you, Stephan. I can think of nothing better than being your proprietress.”

He gazed at her a moment, sheer joy in his eyes, before

surrounding her with his arms. He clung to her as if he feared losing her. "I love you," he said against her hair. "I've never been so scared in all my life as when I thought you'd marry Bart."

She hugged him back. He smelled perfect and warm and male. Being in his arms was doing strange things to her insides, and suddenly, her respectable morning dress, shawl, and slippers seemed like no barrier at all.

"Bart who?" she breathed, barely withstanding the urge to press her lips against his warm neck. Lord Bart had been right about one thing—she'd done a terrible job of keeping her eyes and mouth to herself, where Stephan was concerned.

She wanted to taste him. Everywhere.

Stephan's husky laugh sent shivers through her belly. "I put on all my clothes so you wouldn't think I was trying to seduce you, Miss Conley. I find my intentions have changed."

She leaned back to look at him. "Is it less of a conquest if I admit to thinking the same?"

"On the contrary, I'd call that a smashing success." He raked her with a hungry gaze. "The real challenge comes next."

STEPHAN HAD NEVER HELD ANYTHING as precious as Georgiana's trust.

He cradled her in arms. His breaths ran ragged and his heart slammed against his chest. This time wasn't a tryst against a wall in the middle of a party. He wasn't lost in the mindless throes of lust.

He breathed in the lavender-and-mint scent of her and forced himself to calm. Paid or unpaid, his *amores* had always come from the demimonde class. They knew what he wanted. He knew what he wanted. When he'd kissed Georgiana at Madame Claremont's Salon, he'd viewed her similarly, though he'd been too ignorant to know it at the time.

He'd treated her much like any other woman, because he hadn't fallen in love with her yet.

Tonight would be different. He'd proposed to her. Not out of a sense of duty, or because she could solve his problems with a bank draft. Because she was the most precious gift he'd ever received, and he intended to treasure her forever.

"Come with me," he said, rising. He helped her to her feet and then clasped her hands.

She watched him expectantly with wide, brown eyes. For a split second, he didn't know if he could measure up to her hope. He'd never made love to a woman before. Then he remembered the feel of her, the taste of her, and decided...

It was worth a try.

He led her to his dressing room. Farther from the bed, yet somehow, more intimate. None but his servants had ever come in here.

He positioned her before the mirror, so she could see him undress her. First, the hair pins coiling her plait. He set them in a silver dish. Her gaze in the mirror followed his hand, riveted.

Next, he unbraided her hair. The delicate little waves rippled through his fingers. Had he ever seen anything so private? It felt like she was sharing a secret part of herself with him.

He arranged her deep brown locks in rivulets down her back and

across her shoulders. Then he brushed them aside and kissed her neck. She moaned softly.

"I've barely touched you," he murmured.

Her eyes were half-closed. Her lips curved upward. "You have my permission to go faster, then."

He laughed. Then he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her. Was this real? How could he deserve her?

He didn't. But he'd spend the rest of his life trying.

"They make this difficult on purpose," he said, flicking the topmost button of an excruciatingly long line of the same. "In the hopes we men will give up."

She smiled at him in the mirror. "I shan't show you our secret, then. Close your eyes."

"Impossible. For all the money in the world, I couldn't forgo the opportunity to watch Miss Georgiana Conley undress herself."

She blushed furiously. Bravely, however, she began pulling pins from the front of her dress. He watched each one *plink* into his silver dish as if it were his salvation.

Within moments, her morning gown pooled at their feet. Her gaze met his again. "The rest ties in the back."

Oh, he knew it. His hands shook as he undid her petticoats and stays. He stopped when he reached her shift. "Are you certain?"

She turned around. Her eyes were luminous. This was a momentous decision, and he'd understand if she wanted to wait.

"I want to lie with you," she said, quietly, yet firmly. Then she gave him a droll look. "I'm hoping that part will come *soon*."

He laughed and kissed her. Then he grabbed her shift and tugged it over her head. It landed in a ball on the floor. She stood naked before him, glorious, tall, and so very female.

He hardened at the sight of her. Silky hair fell in tendrils over her breasts. Shadows outlined her narrow waist and a dusting of curls concealed the juncture of her thighs. Her nipples had tightened into little buds in the coolness of his dressing room.

He could stare at her forever, memorizing her just like this.

She didn't hide herself from him. And, unlike most every other woman with whom he'd cavorted, she didn't attempt to seduce him. Their pleasure depended entirely on his ability.

He mustn't disappoint her.

"You're beautiful," he said, taking her hand. He threaded their fingers together. As he led her to the bed, their footsteps whispered against the carpet.

She sat on the edge of his bed while he quickly removed his boots and clothing. A small gasp issued from her lips when his member sprang forth. His cock stiffened further as she stared openly at him,

her mind clearly trying to work out how he'd enter her without hurting her.

"Lie back," he murmured, before joining her on the bed. A sigh of pleasure escaped him as he took her in his arms and pressed his face against her hair. Her skin was like warm silk against his. Her hard, little nipples pressed into his chest.

He moved over her. His cock found that bed of curls and rubbed against it, killing him.

With a nudge of his knee against hers, he slipped his leg between her thighs, binding them from head to toe. She wanted fast, but he must take his time. Otherwise, he would explode.

When he had control again, he found her lips. She opened her mouth for him and he slid his tongue against hers, her nails biting into his shoulders as she instinctively urged him on.

He guided her hips to ride his leg as he plunged into her mouth. She moaned as he gripped her backside. He might die before he'd earned the right to come inside her.

Deftly, he moved to lick her nipple. She cried out as he sucked the tip, then laved the surrounding breast. Its fullness filled his hand. He pressed his thumb against her nipple as he shifted and began the long trek to her most sensitive place.

"What—what are you doing?" she gasped as he kissed and licked her skin. Gooseflesh pebbled across her belly. He blew across her skin, then kissed the inside of each knee as he positioned her for his attentions.

"I want to lick you everywhere," he murmured. "Do you want that?"

A half-laugh burred from her. "I'm not going to stop you now, if that's what you're asking."

An answering chuckle rumbled in his chest. He continued his journey, tickling her with his unshaven jaw as he kissed his way down her thigh. Finally, his mouth found the heat of her. She cried out as he licked her folds. He stroked himself with one hand as she writhed beneath him. God, the taste of her open and wet for him—it was all he could do not to plunge into her right now.

But he waited, because he loved her and he wanted her first time to be perfect. She raised her hips and squeezed her thighs against his ears. He didn't stop. As her cries grew loud enough to wake the house, he swirled his tongue faster against her swollen clitoris. Then she stiffened and went almost silent as her climax stole her breath.

He found himself panting, too. He ached with unspent seed. If she touched him, he would burst.

She eased as she came down from her euphoria. He moved up beside her, then took her face in his hands and brushed his lips against

hers.

She hummed with pleasure, her eyes heavy-lidded as she searched his face.

Fierce possessiveness welled inside him. "I love you," he said, brushing her damp hair behind her ear. "I want you to be mine."

She smiled sleepily at him. "Take me, Stephan. Please. Before I die."

"Before *you* die? Woman, you have no idea."

He smothered her answering laugh with a kiss. She ran her fingernails across his shoulder, driving him mad.

Their kiss deepened. His hand cupped her breast again, savoring the feel of her. Finally, dear God, finally, he allowed himself to trail lower. Between her legs he found molten fire. His fingers slipped easily against her. He inhaled sharply, checking himself.

Slowly, he began exploring her, attuned to the pressure building inside her.

Her breathing became jagged again. Her moans filled his ears. He rubbed his palm against her clitoris and moved his fingers toward that special place inside her.

She was on a precipice. He wanted her to fly.

When at last she stiffened again, raising her hips to meet his hand, he rose to his knees. With an effortless movement, he positioned himself to enter her. Her brown eyes were pools of desire as he paused to admire how beautiful she looked spread before him, like a fallen angel.

Then he drove into her, spoiling all that holiness with something primal and raw. With each thrust, he claimed her for his own. She cried his name. "Stephan! Please! *Please.*"

Her small tremors drove him to his own earth-shattering climax. He pumped into her until his legs shook. At long last, he slowed. His entire body glistened in the candlelight.

"My goodness," she said, after he nuzzled his head between her shoulder and the pillow. "It's a wonder anything gets done."

He chuckled. "Fortunately, men need a bit of time to regain their strength."

She made a disappointed sound.

He laughed again and kissed her hair. "Not that long, for some of us."

Her mischievous grin twisted his insides into knots. Miss Georgiana Conley was a delight.

A few minutes later, as she began her own test of his stamina, he realized—to his absolute joy—that she was also a bit of a minx.

THEY'D PLANNED THE WEDDING with all due haste. He'd insisted upon it. And still, he'd had to wait a lifetime.

Tomorrow, at long last, he and Georgiana would depart for Gloucester. The ceremony was to be held in Hempsted Heath, at the small church her family had attended for two generations. She'd wanted them all to be able to come.

Stephan paced his library impatiently as he waited for her to return from her final fitting. She'd selected a practical gown, not a true wedding gown. Perfect for her introduction to the genteel folk in York, where his ancestral pile was being cleaned and aired for their arrival.

But first, they must travel to Gloucester.

Delay, delay, delay. He didn't care if they married on an open beach in a storm, or before the ruins of a castle during a war, or in St. George's in London. Whatever made Georgiana happy—and could be arranged as quickly as the banns could be read—sufficed. He just wished they didn't have to journey to the end of the earth to get there.

He wanted her to be his wife in every way, and he didn't want to wait.

"A letter, my lord." The footman's voice broke into his vision of Georgiana seated at his mother's writing desk, her pen flowing rapidly as she drafted new recipes for their brewmasters to try.

Stephan took a crumpled, dirty letter off the tray presented to him. His heart skipped a beat as he recognized his sister's dreadful scrawl.

Before he opened her Pandora's box of a missive, he nodded to the servant. "Godspeed, Woods. I trust the next tenants will appreciate your excellent service as much as I have done."

Woods beamed. "Thank you, my lord! I'm only sorry I can't go with you."

"Yes, well, if you change your mind and decide to try your hand at brewing, you know where to find me. I put in a good word with my steward."

The footman smiled sheepishly, in the way people do when they have no intention of following through. "Thank you. I'll keep your

offer in mind, my lord.”

When he was alone again, Stephan cracked the dollop of smoke-blackened wax sealing the letter closed. He scanned the whole of it once, just to alleviate his churning stomach, before going back and re-reading it more slowly.

Cassandra would be at the wedding.

Egad, but he'd been afraid she'd refuse to travel to a provincial place like Hempsted Heath. Or worse, she'd protest Georgiana's lack of dowry and refuse to attend, despite their settled agreement.

The sound of the front door being opened and closed below preceded a light thump of footsteps racing up the stairs. Georgiana burst into his library. Her smile brightened the room as she skidded to a halt in the doorway.

“The most wonderful thing has happened!” She clasped her hands together, but her tiny hop of excitement ruined her attempt at restraint. “Is now a good time?”

He laughed, delighted by her enthusiasm. “We're partners, are we not? You may interrupt me at any time.”

She snapped the door closed behind her. A flush stained her cheeks. It quickly traveled to her collarbone. She turned to him, a flash of doubt crossing her face before she erupted into smiles again.

“What is it?” His curiosity piqued. She was thrilled by her news, but reticent to discuss it with him. “You may tell me anything,” he assured her.

She smoothed her skirts and drew a fortifying breath. “I'm being silly. It's the most wonderful thing, really.”

He moved closer to her, but stopped when her expression begged him to wait. She'd tell him, she just needed time.

He waited for her to collect her thoughts.

“The thing is,” she began, “I've ruined my gown. The new one. My wedding dress.” Before he could reassure her there were plenty of gowns to be found in time, and that he hardly cared what she wore, she added, “They're working the stain as best they can in the kitchens, but oh, it's quite mortifying, really. Imagine casting up your accounts on your wedding dress, right in front of the modiste.”

Concern shot through him. He took a few more steps toward her before she raised a hand to stop him. “Are you unwell?” he asked, bemused.

She shook her head quickly. “It's nothing. Actually, it's everything. It's more than I ever imagined possible.” Her chin lifted as she found her courage. She looked in his eyes. “I'm increasing, Stephan. I'm *increasing*.” Her voice broke as she burst into tears.

He closed the remaining distance and wrapped her in his arms. Joy infused him from head to toe. For years, he'd considered his cousin his

heir. He'd set aside the idea of fathering his own children long ago.

She sobbed in his arms. "I'm so... happy... Stephan."

A garbled chuckle broke through his own rising emotion. "Me, too, my love. I'd almost forgotten this was even possible."

She leaned back, staring at his neckcloth. Her voice shook. "Given my advanced age, I didn't think it was possible." She straightened a bit, swiping at her eyes with the back of her sleeve. "It's not *impossible*. One always hears of a woman in the next village who's conceived at an unlikely age. And you're practically a god. I'm certain a virile man is an asset, in this situation."

He laughed at her logic, then kissed her soundly. When she began smiling like a radiant sun again, he released her. "Perhaps we should leave a little later tomorrow than we'd planned," he suggested. "I've heard women in your condition are delicate in the morning."

She blushed again. "It was the most embarrassing moment of my entire life. You can't adequately imagine the look of horror on Madame's face. I can't go back. I simply cannot."

He kissed her nose, then took her hand. "I don't think we'll be shopping in London again any time soon. But we may need to postpone our survey of the new tavern in Devon. Do you think Abigail will manage it well enough on her own?"

"I hadn't thought of that!" Georgiana followed him onto the landing. "We can ask her when we see her at the wedding."

Stephan remembered his own good news. He turned to her. "Speaking of sisters, it seems my letter reached Cassandra, after all. She's agreed to join us in Gloucester next week."

"That's wonderful! Oh, Stephan, I know what that must mean to you."

He took her in his arms. Because he loved her. She was soon to be his wife. And she was carrying his child.

Besides, it just felt right.

"I can't imagine a better day," he said. "To think, we have thousands of these ahead."

"They won't all be this grand," she warned him.

"Maybe not," he admitted. "But they'll all be with you."

Epilogue

September, 1819
Gillygate, Yorkshire

GEORGIANA ARRIVED IN TIME to watch the last barrel of ale being loaded onto the final wagon. She shifted her two-year-old son on her hip. It seemed he'd put on half a stone in the last week alone.

"Collette," she called to her daughter, a little girl with shiny brown curls attempting to climb onto the driver's bench. "Don't spook the horses. Come here, please."

Stephan grunted as he and another man boosted the final barrel into the wagon. Perspiration dampened his brow and neck. He stepped back, his shoulders heaving from the exertion of having helped his men all afternoon. "That's the lot, Mr. Brooks. All accounted for. Better fetch the drivers."

"Yes, my lord." Mr. Brooks, one of the newest apprentices at the brewhouse, scurried off to find the missing men. Stephan had needed to hire four wagons for this order, their largest and most prestigious yet.

He went to the wagon box and held out his arms for his daughter. She squealed with delight and jumped into his embrace. "Papa! Is this one *mine*?"

He chuckled. "No, no, my darling. This one is for the prince! Do you think he wants a little ragamuffin stowing away in his shipment?" He kissed her round cheek, then set her on the ground. "Now, where did Mr. Pickles go? Did you leave him on the bench? Ah, yes, here he is, crying for help."

Georgiana's heart bloomed as her husband kneeled and placed Collette's well-loved frog prince in the crook of her arm. Even now, almost four years later, seeing Stephan adore their children was her greatest pleasure.

He rose and came to her. Little George reached for his papa. Stephan tossed the lad onto his shoulders. Then he grinned at Georgiana. "Can you believe we were selected? This commission is almost enough to close out my IOU with Cassandra. I can't fathom it."

Georgiana stretched her arms over her head. The baby really was too big to carry. She just couldn't seem to accept he was growing up.

When she could feel her arms again, she stepped closer and wrapped them around her husband. His sweaty waistcoat clung to his lower back. He smelled like exertion and man. Even his carefully arranged hair had long ago surrendered to the heat. But she loved him like this, Stephan the Gentleman Brewer. Stephan, His Lordship the Tavernkeeper.

She nuzzled her face against his chest. "Another momentous day, my love. I pray His Royal Highness is satisfied and we are able to pay down Lord Montborne next."

Stephan kissed the top of her head. "Best not to get ahead of ourselves. I want to enjoy this victory a little longer. What do you think, George? Shall we see if Cook can whip up a picnic lunch? Perhaps those sugar biscuits we had last week? I'm famished."

Their son bounced with excitement on Stephan's shoulders. "Yes, yes, Papa! Let's eat!"

Georgiana stepped away, lest little George kick her in the face with his enthusiasm. Stephan grasped her hand and they all started for the main house.

The late summer day had dawned bright and sunny. Their estate sprawled in every direction, though behind them, the large brewhouse and new storage barns created a busy nook. Stephan whistled as they walked toward the manor house.

She couldn't believe he'd ever lived in London. His boots were scuffed from working in the brewhouse. His greatcoat was more often hanging on the back of a chair or tossed across a barrel than on his person. Almost daily, they found time for a long walk as a family, rambling over the narrow footpaths crossing the countryside. And she was a countess! She rarely, if ever, remembered it.

"Are you certain we must go to Town?" she asked, wishing they could postpone the inevitable forever.

He squeezed her hand. He never hesitated to reassure her. "We can finally afford to let a flat. I've no excuse anymore for shirking my duty in the House of Lords. But we'll return as soon as the session ends, I vow it. Besides, don't you want to see your sister?"

She pulled a face. "Not as badly as you want to see your sister."

"Auntie Cass!" George cried, for children were always listening, even when they didn't understand.

"We'll enjoy ourselves, I promise," Stephan said. "The museums alone can occupy you for a month. When we return home, we'll love this place all the more for having left it."

She tried to imagining loving her life even more than she already did. It seemed impossible, and yet, everything about being with

Stephan had seemed a far-off dream. She gazed at his profile, then smiled when he turned and winked at her.

London had never truly been in question. She'd follow him to China and back, if he asked.

What were a handful of days, when they had thousands and thousands more like this yet to come?

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EMMA LOCKE

Chapter 1

LADY CASSANDRA LAURENT saw her brother marry Miss Georgiana Conley in a long, drawn-out ceremony. She watched the happy couple preside over their wedding breakfast from atop a dais erected on the lawn. The breakfast was held behind the ironworks, a little white building at the edge of the village.

Her eyes didn't glaze over as the servants cleared the last plates and began doling out tea. She even managed to make idle conversation with Gavin, the bride's blacksmith brother, and his pretty wife, the one with the wide, innocent eyes. But Cass's mind was two hundred miles away.

In Paris.

With Marguerite.

Cass reached into her boot and withdrew the small flask she'd been sipping from all morning. Marguerite. The traitor. The coward.

Cass wanted to blame her brother, Stephan, for taking too long to restore her dowry. She'd needed that money in order to retire to France.

She wanted to blame society and the hypocrisy that prevented two people who loved each other from marrying.

She did partly blame herself, for leaving. Three years was an eternity for anyone to wait.

But she *blamed* Marguerite. Marguerite hadn't trusted her. Marguerite hadn't believed in their love.

Marguerite had married a man.

Cass swallowed her last mouthful of whiskey and slipped the flask back into her boot. As soon as this feast ended, she'd ride hell-for-leather until her horse tired and she was forced to stop. Then she'd scream and rail at the unfairness of it all. But not now. Not here.

The minutes ticked by.

And when she'd finally calmed herself, what then?

Where did she go next? If not Paris, then where did she belong?

"I think, since we've already had our introduction, and we're now family of a sorts, it's not untoward for me to greet you, Lady Cassandra."

Cass turned toward the uncertain voice. No one knew her, apart from her brother and his new wife.

Ah, yes. And little Abigail.

“Formalities are a waste of time,” Cass replied, in the clipped way she spoke when she didn’t want to be probed further. “Anyone ought to be able to speak to anyone else, so long as they have something meaningful to say.”

Miss Abigail blushed. She was a comely chit, with reddish brown hair and green eyes. Freckles dusted her nose. She didn’t have the soft curves Cass preferred, tending toward lankiness like her older sisters, but she was no twig. If she had a dowry, and a title, she’d be considered a catch.

Cass had spent all of her life making such observations. Mostly for her own interest. More recently, she’d been searching for an heiress for her brother to wed.

Look how that had turned out. Georgiana Conley hadn’t brought a dime into their coffers.

“Well, I...I don’t have much to say, apart from good morning,” Miss Abigail stammered. “I hope you’ve enjoyed your stay in our village. I know it’s not what you’re used to, being so worldly and all that.”

Cass wished she hadn’t drained her flask so quickly. Miss Abigail was almost fifteen years her junior. They’d shared a carriage for three long days earlier in the year, when the girl had injured herself and needed a return escort from London.

The tediousness of this conversation hadn’t even begun.

She leaned to look up at Miss Abigail over her shoulder. Cass’s tricorne blocked the morning sun. It also shielded their conversation from prying eyes. “I’ve had worse lodging. How is your ankle? I trust it’s healed by now.”

The young woman brightened. “How kind of you to ask! It’s right as rain, thanks to your quick thinking. I’m ever so glad you were nearby. You saved my life.”

“It was just a sprain, Miss Abigail. You’d have survived.”

She shook her head. “I should have died from the shame of it, had you not been there to help me off the ground and make everything right again.”

Cass didn’t remember anything so dire. “Yes, well, it was no trouble.” dpg!

“And I’m doubly glad you insisted I return to Gloucester. Being home was just what I needed. I’ve thought of your kindness every day since.”

Cass narrowed her eyes. That was laying it on a bit thick. “Again, it was no trouble, Miss Conley. Think nothing of it.”

The young lady clasped her hands together. Her head tilted, causing her loose bonnet ribbons to brush across the tops of her breasts. “Oh, but I can’t forget! I still can’t believe you brought me home yourself. Your generosity is astounding, my lady. No one else could have done it the way you did.”

Cass paused. Then she raked her gaze up, from Miss Abigail’s décolletage and the navy blue lace adorning her neckline, to the slightly flushed pale skin at her collarbone, to her freckled face. Perhaps it was the whiskey playing tricks on her, but Miss Abigail seemed a little *too* grateful.

“Are you flattering me?” she asked the young lady, just to see what would happen.

Miss Abigail blushed again.

Furiously.

Interesting. Very interesting.

Cass draped her arm over the ladder back chair and turned slightly, to better face the young woman. “Flattery is always appreciated, Miss Abigail. But I only thought to save face. You were my brother’s guest. I could hardly allow you to expire in the middle of Madame Claremont’s Salon. And when I insisted you return home, it was to save coin. I saw no point in keeping you in London when it was clear you weren’t in a state for husband-hunting.”

Miss Abigail’s pretty face fell. “Oh.”

Cass didn’t smile often, as a rule. She seldom found anything to smile about. But she crooked her lips at Miss Abigail. Her eyes crinkled at the corners. “Now we have no secrets between us, Miss Abigail Conley. What were you saying about gratitude?”

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THE LURING OF A LOVELY LADY

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The Luring of a Lovely Lady

Acknowledgments

I WORKED ON THIS BOOK FOR SO LONG, I ended up naming my third child Georgianna. I worked on this book for so long, I've actually had *two* children since I began it.

I worked on this book for so long, the standard lengths of books changed in the interim. Thank God for the rise of the novella, or I may never have finished it at all.

There are a few people who've kept me sane and productive. Morgan Edens is my forever cheerleader, plotting partner, beta reader, and IRL best friend. She even moved back across the country so we could be together. (Now, if we could just kick this damned COVID thing, I might actually be able to see her.)

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Lastly, thank you to all the readers who took the time to send a message asking where this book went. Even when I put off replying for months because I didn't have an answer, I kept your email in my inbox to remind me that people were waiting. I can't tell you how much that helped me stay committed to finishing this book. I love that you were looking for Wayward Rogue and I'm so, so sorry it took so long!

About the Author

EMMA LOCKE is a USA Today Bestselling Author of smart, sensual Regency romances. Her current books make up the *Scandalous Spinsters* series, a triple trilogy featuring three jaded courtesans, three country hoydens, and three sheltered sisters who marry into the notorious Alexander family. In her free time, she's an industrial engineer in the Pacific Northwest, where she loves cuddling with her three kids, weight lifting, and avoiding housework.

You can check out her books and appearances at www.emmalocke.com.

